



# GHOST GIRL IN THE CORNER

A SHADOWSHAPER NOVELLA

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ARTHUR A. LEVINE BOOKS  
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This Book is Dedicated to Black Girls Everywhere.

You are Powerful.

You are Beautiful.

You are Loved.

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# ONE

Tee immediately knew three things about the dead girl in the corner, but the most pressing one was that she had a secret. The other two — that she was dead and that she was, or had been, a cutie — seemed beside the point somehow.

Tee had just finished zipping up the back of a dress she definitely wasn't supposed to be wearing. It had taken some work — she'd had to do a whole awkward dance, wrapping both arms around herself and twisting into all kinds of unfortunate satanic yoga poses. She'd looked up, panting, caught herself in the mirror, smiled winningly, and then gasped as a cool hush settled over her skin, something like a gentle midwinter night breeze.

Except it was July.

And she was in a drafty church basement.

And the small windows at the top of the wall were all sealed shut.

For a second she thought it was her own guilty conscience. (Or maybe just the voice of her girlfriend, Izzy: *This is what you get for being nosy*, she would've chided.) Tee'd been going through Manny's trunk, and while Manny was dead, she had no business shuffling through his personal items, let alone *wearing* them. But this dress probably wasn't his — even if he'd had a thing for cross-dressing, there was no way it would've fit him — and anyway, well, it was a fierce silky violet number with an open back and a fluffy pink boa attached. Violet was Tee's favorite color. And the style ... Tee always had a helluva time finding slick, slinky dresses that hugged her thick frame without asphyxiating her or drooping in some off-kilter way.

Most of the time she just gave up and shopped in the men's department, where the various sizes seemed more forgiving of her curves and rolls.

But this smooth, violet masterpiece looked like it was made for her, so she'd stripped out of her jeans and polo shirt real quick to make sure it actually fit as well as it seemed like it would. And it did! Caught her hips just so, and the violet accentuated her light brown skin like a watercolor painting, and the neckline slid down her right shoulder, leaving it bare for all the world to see, and allowing just the right amount of topboob to peek out. She hadn't even brought the boa into play, and — Lord.

Then that chill caught her midswoon, and she looked up. There, in the far corner behind the giant printing press, stood the dead girl. Or hovered, really.

Tee just barely caught her scream before it came out.

This wasn't the first ghost she'd seen. It certainly wouldn't be the last. She had no business acting brand-new. But still: Tee was alone in the same church basement where, a few weeks earlier, she and her friends had found Manny's body sprawled out in the darkness. The only other spirits she had seen had been floating lovingly into the darkening sky over Coney Island Beach, where her friend Sierra initiated Tee and all the rest of the crew into a secret magic called shadowshaping. Those spirits looked like shadows with a gentle pulsing glow — somehow dark and luminous at the same time. The shadow swallowed up most of their features, made them more a what than a who.

But this girl ... She stared across the room at Tee with big eyes, her mouth slightly open. She looked like she was around Tee's age, give or take. Afropuffs poked out of either side of her head like two moons. She wore a headband with cat ears on it and had black streaks painted along her cheeks: whiskers.

Tee took a few steps toward the ghost girl; their eyes locked. Tee caught her breath — that stare seemed to take her in entirely, swallow her whole. She hadn't felt so seen in a long time. Matter'a fact, she'd been feeling about a hundred miles away from everyone for a while now, even Izzy, and

she didn't know why. She took another step. A gentle blue haze illuminated the corner where the ghost girl hovered; tiny dots of light flickered and spun around her like lightning bugs. Transfixed, Tee realized she was smiling. And somehow she knew, above anything else, that this suddenly sacred moment was meant just for her, like catching sight of a rare, beautiful bird outside the window that flies away before you get a chance to tell anyone else about it.

Somewhere in that glowing form, the ghost girl held a secret, or maybe she herself was the secret. It was delicate and perfect, this secret, like a tiny flower, and Tee knew that whatever it was, she would do anything to protect it.

"Who —" Tee began, and then the door burst open, startling her damn near to death as daylight poured into the dim basement.

"You down there, Tee?" Sierra's unmistakable silhouette stood in the doorway, arms akimbo, the edges of her huge fro lined with a golden shimmer of afternoon sunlight.

"Yeah," Tee said. "C'mon in."

"Well, damn," Sierra said as she came down the stairs, giving Tee a good up-and-down. "Look at you!"

"Ha, well ..." Tee cast a quick glance to the corner, where the ghost girl remained, her eyes still wide, gaze fixed right on Tee. "You know. Just doin' me. I guess."

Sierra walked in and put a grocery bag on the table. "Brought you the router you asked for and some random tech junk folks had layin' around. Jerome and Izzy coming with the computer and everything else. There's no change; receipts are in the bags. I hope those foundation people really do reimburse you! Neville's outside with the Caddy if you want us to bring out any more stuff for you." Sierra, of all Tee's friends, should be able to see the ghost girl, but she didn't even cast a second glance toward the shimmering corner.

"Oh, thanks," Tee said. "Yeah. Or no ..." Did she? Besides the huge printing press and Linotype machine, and a few random boxes and file

cabinets, this trunk was pretty much all that was left of the *Bed-Stuy Searchlight* offices. She wasn't sure she wanted to give it up now that she'd found treasures in it.

"There's more of this stuff?" Sierra gaped at the open trunk.

"What stuff?" Izzy said from the doorway. "Damn, babe! You fancy!"

Big Jerome stopped right behind her, lugging a big cardboard box. "I'm fine!" he called. "I got it, no need to worry! Thanks for the help, though!"

"Hey," Izzy said. "I brought the mouse." She patted her pockets. "Oh, damn, left it in the car actually. What stuff is there more of, you guys?"

Everything was happening too fast. And why hadn't anyone said anything about the ghost in the corner? Could they not see it? "Oh, just some'a Manny's stuff." She closed the trunk, not knowing why her best friends' sudden presence felt like such an invasion. "I'll go get it for you."

"Get what for me?" Izzy asked, sliding up to Tee and giving her a quick kiss.

"The mouse or whatever; you left it in the car?" Tee walked out into the bright summer day, the hot July air thick and heavy after that cool, dank basement, and rounded the front of the church. The dress slid along her like a second skin, made her stride slinky and smooth, even in the heat.

Sierra's godfather, Uncle Neville, leaned against his Cadillac Seville, smiling up at the sky. Alligator shoes and creased suit pants: Neville would be dapper to the day he died. "Whaddup, girl? You lookin' fancier, Tee! How come you never hit the town in a gown like that?"

Tee looked down, her smile breaking out unbidden. "Oh, I ... I never had a gown like this one. Found it in Manny's trunk. I probably shouldn'ta ..."

Neville's face went suddenly sullen.

"What is it?"

He looked away. "Just ... Manny, man. We had the funeral but never really got to mourn. Just like him to keep a pretty dress in a random chest for no apparent reason. Damn. That's the stuff that gets you, ya know?"



Tee knew. She'd barely known her dad, but his out-of-focus smile still made an appearance every time someone put cinnamon in coffee.

"He was just one of those cats that was always around, so you figured he'd always be around. Till he ain't. Did more for this community than a hundred politicians or corny orgs ever could." Neville shook his head as if clearing cobwebs of sadness. "Anyway, I heard you takin' over the *Searchlight* now!" His grin hinted at mischief.

Tee tried to imagine what kind of trouble she could really cause running a local paper, came up short. "Just for the summer. Heard the church was gonna clear out his stuff and saw a grant posted online for youth community journalism, so I applied. Pretty sure they were more hype about there being an *actual* printing press than anything I brought to the table, but hey — money's money, you know?"

"Amen, amen." Neville handed her the mouse and a bag of random wires. "Here, they left this stuff in the car. I'd say call me if you need help setting up the computer-majiggies, but I'm sure all y'all better at that crap than old Uncle Neville anyway."

"True," Tee said, dapping Neville. "Later!"

"Aight, kiddo. Holler if you need any leads. You know I got 'em."

Tee turned to find Father Thomas stepping out of the front doors of the church, a garden hose in one hand. "Today's the big day, huh, Tee?" he said with a smile. Father Thomas was one of those racially ambiguous cats; no one could figure out whether he was a light-skinned black dude, some flavor of Latino, Asian maybe, or just a white dude with a tan. Everyone took bets, but no one had ever bothered to ask him; it was more fun guessing. He was slender and bland and nice as hell.

"Yep," Tee said. "You comin' to see the press go back in action?"

Father Thomas shook his head and gave a sad shrug. "I don't ... After everything, you know ... " Of course: Manny.

"I understand."

"Haven't been down there in years, actually. Creeps me out, to be honest."

“Hey, Padre!” Neville yelled. “How ’bout I step out the way and you give this Caddy a good spray-down, since you out here with the hose and whatnot?”

Father Thomas’s face broke into a boyish grin. “It would be my pleasure!”

“And they say the Lord works in mysterious ways,” Neville chuckled. “Seems pretty straightforward to me.”

Tee ducked under the spray of water and headed around back.

---

“So, uh ... what’s goin’ on, Tee?” Big Jerome asked as Tee walked down the cement stairs into the basement.

“I’m getting set up for the *Searchlight* meeting,” Tee said. “Duh.” In the corner, the ghost girl hovered and glowed, eyes fixed on Tee.

Izzy raised an eyebrow. “He means, why you dressed like Billie Holiday or whatever?”

“Oh.” Tee managed a laugh. “Just ... found this. Is all.”

Izzy did a little mambo. “You should wear it to my show at the beach tonight.”

The beach! She’d totally forgotten Izzy was playing the huge Summer Slam party at Coney Island later on. “I dunno,” Tee muttered.

Izzy squinted at her. “You comin’, right?”

“Juan playin’ too,” Sierra said. Her brother’s band, Culebra, mixed thrasher metal and salsa into something new and ferocious and beautiful.

“Of course.” Tee tried to sound convincing, and she was pretty sure all she succeeded at was sounding like she was trying to sound convincing.

“Aight, good.” Izzy either pretended not to notice or didn’t care. “We out. See you there.”

“Wait, y’all ain’t stayin’ for the meeting?” Tee said.

“Babe. I’m performing in a few hours and I gotta get my beauty sleep. Anyway, you don’t want me at ya meeting; Imma just cause trouble.”

“I —”

“And I gotta run around doing a buncha junk with my mom,” Sierra said.

“Plus,” Izzy added, “I’m ’bouta be on my period.”

Big Jerome waved from the corner, where he had just finished plugging in the computer and router. “Thanks, Iz! We needed to know that!”

“Yo, J,” Izzy snapped. “You can either exit from being perpetually twelve and hang with the big dogs or you can go get ya diaper changed.”

“Damn,” Jerome said, getting to his feet and dusting himself off. “You didn’t have to do me like that.”

Izzy twirled and kissed Tee on the cheek. “Seems I did. Later, babe. Have a good meeting. Don’t be late to the beach.”

A few daps and “Later” later, Tee stood in front of the mirror again, alone.

Alone, except.

Was it wrong that Ghost Girl made her more comfortable than her own friends? Tee wondered. Than her girlfriend? It felt both wrong and right at the same time. And they hadn’t seen her, which had somehow been both creepy and a relief at the same time.

She unzipped the silky violet dress and shimmied out of it, freeing her folds and breasts and feeling wildly alive. The funders and her brand-new crew of teen reporters would show up any minute, and Tee barely gave an echo of a damn. She spun once in front of the mirror, took in the full range of herself, smiled. Was Ghost Girl watching? Probably.

She paused, caught her own eye, that twinkling glow in the background, bright again in the dim basement overheads.

Probably not the best way to greet people who had just awarded her a fat grant — standing there in her skivvies. She scrunched her face and then slid into her jeans and polo, which felt kind of like going home to an empty house, now that she’d experienced the swagger of that silk stretch against her skin.

“Knock knock!” a chipper voice called from the doorway. “It’s Jessica!”

“And Ms. Rollins!”

“Come through,” Tee called. She caught her breath as all the magic seemed to flow out of the room again.

“We brought your team,” Jessica said, leading a group of teenagers down the stairs. Ms. Rollins, Tee’s AP History teacher at Octavia Butler High, brought up the rear. Ms. Rollins had a dragon tat running up one arm, and Tee thought she was fine as hell. Today she was wearing a floral blouse and looking slightly sunburned but still delicious.

Jessica Newman, on the other hand, radiated plain white-lady vibes with her gray pantsuit and coiffed blond hair. She smiled like if she didn’t, her whole face might shatter — genial, maybe even genuine, but a few missed deadlines or unscheduled interruptions away from total meltdown. She reached out a slender hand to Tee. “Wonderful to finally meet you after all that emailing!” She winked conspiratorially.

“I mean, just three emails, really,” Tee said, but Jessica didn’t seem to notice.

“These are your intrepid reporters: Mina, Rafael, and Couro — Coo-roh ... Cuh ...”

“Coruscant,” a short kid in a basketball jersey and Stetson said in an unnecessarily extravagant French accent. He sounded like a bad soap-opera star trying to overpronounce *croissant*. “Coruscant Barretto.”

“Right.” Jessica giggled. “What he said. Anyway, I just want to welcome you all.”

“From Paris,” Coruscant added, cutting off the s and extending the i. Tee sat on a table facing everyone and tried not to roll her eyes.

“Okay,” Jessica said with a little snap now. “Let’s get to it. I’m Jessica Newman, you’ve all emailed with me. And this is Lauren Rollins, who some of you may know as Ms. Rollins from Butler High, right?”

Ms. Rollins waved and smiled at Tee. Tee threw her a cool *whatsgood* eyebrow raise.

“We’ll be overseeing the project,” Jessica went on, “but think of us more as advisors. I’m with the Kirzen Foundation, which initiated this grant, and we’re so excited to have you all here to continue the legacy of”

— she checked her notes — “Manuel Gomez and his work of community journalism, which is really the front lines of media, right?”

“Sure,” Tee said.

“So we’ve assembled this diverse group of you guys to make this paper happen, even though Mr. Gomez is tragically no longer with us. Why don’t you introduce yourselves and then we’ll let you guys do your thing. Rafael, you can start.”

Rafael, a muscley kid in a tight Dominican flag T-shirt, acid-washed jeans, and designer sneakers, stroked his tiny goatee and glared at Jessica Newman for a good five seconds before sighing. “Alright, my name is Rafael, I’m —”

“You Puerto Rican, right?” Tee said winningly.

Coruscant snorted. Rafael threw his hands up. “Coño, que carajo ...”

“Relax, playa,” Tee said. “I was kidding.”

“Oh.” He simmered. “Right.” He seemed to dig around for a smile and finally found one. “Anyway, yes, I am Rafael, I like to write about esports and that’s really about it, you know? I’m just here for the check, really, to be honest.”

“Fantastic,” Tee said.

The scrawny white girl next to him went next. Mina Satorius. Tee knew her from school, but only barely. “I’m actually from Staten Island,” Mina said. “But there’s no project like this out there and, like ... I like writing, so I figured I’d give this a shot. But I know it’s kinda weird to show up and, like, write about someone else’s neighborhood, ’specially since I’m a white girl and all, so I’m down to cover whatever beat makes sense, Tee.”

“Well,” Jessica jumped in, “all opinions and points of view are welcome here, so —”

“No,” Tee interrupted. “Mina, I appreciate that; that was real. We gonna find a good beat for you.”

“What do you normally write about?” Jessica asked.

Behind her, Ms. Rollins put her hand over her face and sighed.

“Serial killers,” Mina said.

Jessica's smile didn't fade, but something inside her seemed to crumble just a little bit. "Oh. That's ... oh."

"I am Coruscant," Coruscant said.

"We know," Ms. Rollins muttered.

"Barretto is my last name."

"From Paree," Rafael and Tee said at the same time.

Coruscant shot them an annoyed look. "Oui."

"And what do you like to write about, Coorohsant?" Jessica asked.

He shrugged. "Eh, beautiful women, mostly."

"This is gonna be an amazing paper," Ms. Rollins said.

Jessica looked like she had to expend physical effort to ignore her. "So, a dating column, maybe? Fantastic." She turned her wide gaze to Tee.

"Huh? Oh," Tee said. She stood, adjusted herself. "I'm, uh, Trejean, but folks call me Tee. I love writing, I write about everything, but I haven't shown a whole lot to the world except here and there on my blog or whatever. I guess I mostly just keep a diary. My girlfriend's a rapper, King Impervious, you mighta heard of her, she's kind of a big deal. If you have a problem with me having a girlfriend, you can eat a whole bag of dicks. Oh, and I knew Manny. Not well, but I live in Bed-Stuy, so you know, he was always here, somewhere. Like the moon, kinda. Even when he wasn't there, you knew he would show up in another day or two. But now he ain't here and he ain't gonna be here and it makes me sad as hell, to be honest. So I figured carrying on the *Searchlight* would be a way to honor him somehow."

Jessica looked truly moved. "Thank you, Trejean. Thank you for that beautiful tribute. Okay, so we're going to leave you to it. Cover the neighborhood, write the stories that no one else writes, just try to keep a happy face on it, is all we ask, okay? So even if you're writing about, let's say, a relationship that didn't go well, Coorohsant, you know, maybe end on an upbeat note like *Hey, maybe you guys will get back together*, you know?"

Everyone just stared at her.



“Or if you’re covering a serial killer, Mina — okay, bad example, never mind. If a crime happens, let’s say, and we’re writing about it, make sure to approach it from a sunny angle somehow, you know? Maybe there’s a bright side of it that someone hasn’t seen, but you can? Right? Because that’s what we’re trying to do here, make people happy. The neighborhood is changing a lot, right? So let’s figure out how that’s a positive thing and focus on that, alright? Alright. Ms. Rollins has your stipend checks, so she’s going to pass those out, and we’ll see you on the emails!” Jessica gave a quick, peppy wave and then retreated quickly up the stairs.

Ms. Rollins looked as stunned as everyone else. “Uh ... here’s your checks,” she said. “Good luck with that.” She dropped a stack of envelopes on the table next to Tee, raised her eyebrows, waved, and was out.

The door closed. A few seconds passed.

Mina said, “Well, I, for one, am *shocked* that the white lady doesn’t want us to write about any of the ills of gentrification.”

“Yo!” Rafael yelled as everyone busted out laughing.

Tee let the last giggles die down, then she snatched up the checks and passed them out. “Alright, listen. First of all: Ignore all that shit she just said.”

“Menos mal,” Rafael sighed.

“Thank you!” Mina yelped.

Coruscant just shrugged.

“Second of all” — she glared at Coruscant — “tu ne parles pas un mot de français, hm?”

“Eh ...” He sat back, hands up like he was being held up. “Ménage à trois —”

Tee shook her head. “I knew it! Cut that accent out right now.”

“Seriously,” Mina said. “If you’re French, I’m Jay-Z.”

“Fine, fine, fine.” He dropped his hands and the accent. “My name really is Coruscant Barretto, though, I swear. And the second *c* and first *t* are silent.”

Tee rolled her eyes. “How the ... Why, bruh?”

“My parents are high-functioning *Star Wars* nerds.”

“No, man, why you gotta fake the funk with French?”

“Oh, I mean ... I dunno. I like messing with people?”

“Alright, save it for the beat we assign you. Speaking of which, let’s do that. And look, I’m serious. No sunny happy shit, please; I will fire you with a quickness.”

“But we already got paid,” Rafael pointed out.

“I don’t care, man, I’ll get that money back and give it to someone real. Watch me.”

“Damn.”

“Alright, beats,” Tee said. “Mina — you want crime?”

“Actually ...” She squirmed in her chair and tugged at the scarf she had wrapped around her slender neck. “I was thinking — a lotta Staten Island folks, including my batshit grandma, were Brooklyn folks once upon a time. Then Great White Flight happened and they dipped, ended up on one of the islands — Staten or Long — and took their money and resources with ’em. Now they sitting there feelin’ bitter about the fact that Brooklyn ain’t theirs anymore and whining about how the bad black and brown folks took it over. Meanwhile, their young, hip counterparts are mounting an actual takeover and pricing out black and brown folks, ya know?”

“Our girl just summarized thirty years of urban history in a half a ’graph,” Coruscant marveled.

“So I wanna find a couple bitter white folks and sweeten ’em up so they unload all that nasty racist shit they carrying around. Then find some hipsters and see what’s what, feel me?”

“Dope,” Tee said. “That’s your beat, then. You got it. Keep it focused, though. This ain’t a dissertation.”

“No doubt.”

“And no serial killers.”

“Aw, man.”

Tee sorted out the rest of the assignments pretty quickly: Coruscant would cover fashion, and Rafael whatever local sports were going on.

“What you gonna write about?” Rafael asked.

“Whatever I feel like,” Tee said. When Rafael scowled, she grinned. “I was thinking of interviewing some of the old guys that wander around aimlessly. Old Drasco —”

Coruscant perked up. “With the cats?”

“With the cats. And Uh-Oh Guy.”

“Who’s that?” Rafael asked.

“Uh-Oh Guy walks around all night holding a mirror up to his face and yelling *Uh-oh!*” Coruscant explained. “No one knows why.”

“Exactly,” Tee said.

“Good shit,” Coruscant said.

Tee clapped her hands. “Alright, go get ’em, intrepid reporters. And remember: No sunshine happy-happy bullshit.”

---

And then Tee was alone again.

Alone and very much alive, and somehow even more so because, there in the corner, the dead girl swirled in her ethereal glow. Tee had managed to keep her eyes from sliding over to her every couple seconds while the meeting was happening. It took work, though. Now she let the silence settle in, then turned and faced the ghost girl head-on. She took a step toward her, then another.

“What’s your name?” Tee’s own voice startled her in the stillness.

The ghost girl just swirled and stared, swirled and stared.

“What do you want?” Tee now stood just a few inches away from the girl’s shining nose. It was wide like Tee’s and had a ring through the septum.

*Yes-or-no questions*, Tee thought. *Fool.*

“Do you want something?”

The ghost girl just swirled and stared, cool unblinking eyes, mouth slightly open.

“Alright,” Tee said. Her heart seemed to climb into her throat as the idea formed inside her. “We gonna try something.” She glanced at Manny’s old Linotype machine. “You’re here for a reason. You showing yourself to *me* for a reason.”

She was a shadowshaper, after all. Sierra had brought her and their friends into that sacred magic one night on the beach. So Tee had that power in her, even if she had no idea how to use it yet. Sierra had told them all: You raise one hand to the sky, and when the spirit enters, you touch a work of art, and the spirit will go through you and into the art and then inhabit it. In the form of art, the spirit becomes powerful, much more so than when it’s just a glowing shadow. But the newly inducted shadowshapers still hadn’t had a chance to hold that practice session Sierra kept talking about, and then everyone got busy and and and ... Here she was, clueless and face-to-face with a dead girl in an empty basement.

And even for all that, not terrified.

Nervous, but not afraid.

Tee took a breath, steadied herself, and walked over to the Linotype machine. It looked like the cockpit of some giant steampunk insect: metal gears and levers and a wide keyboard you sat in front of. This was where Manny would create the plates for each article that would then get pressed into the full paper. He said he loved the clackity-clack of each stroke, how words became rhythms on it, something alive and brave, that he couldn’t abide the hush of computer keyboards, not when he’d heard the secret, shameless Linotype rhythms of words.

The machine wasn’t a work of art, not exactly, but what was the difference, really? Someone had made it, or many someones. Tee reached over and clicked it on; the Linotype churned to life. She glanced back at the ghost girl. She was maybe a little closer now. Yes. The corner she had been hovering in — lurking in, really — was darker; the girl had moved. Tee’s eyes went wide; her heart stammered a frantic pitter-patter. She held one hand over the keys, glanced over her shoulder just in time to catch the spirit flushing forward, arms stretched out.

It took everything in Tee not to flinch and break into a run. She didn't, though; she threw her other hand up, meeting the girl as she launched through the air. Then a smooth iciness flooded through Tee's arm, her chest, her whole face, seemed to light up with a frosty fire. The feeling slid down her other arm and was gone, and Tee took two startled steps back as that gentle blue light pulsed from the Linotype.

For a few seconds, Tee just stared at the machine. She'd done it. She'd shadowshaped. On her first damn try, no less. She let a slight smile spread across her face, and then a key thudded forward with a sharp *ka-chunk!*

Tee jumped back, then remembered that that was exactly why she was trying this in the first place. She peered at the little window over to the side that revealed what letter each metal slug carried as it slid into place.

H

*Ka-chunk!*

Tee already knew what the next three letters would be, but she looked anyway.

*Ka-chunk-chunk!*

E L P

## TWO

“I treat this / Like Imma beat this,” Izzy muttered. “Something mothasomething with the effing effing meat, sis.”

The late setting sun cast a warm orange haze around Izzy’s long shadow. Bed-Stuy rippled with passing cars, folks on the stoop, old ladies selling syrupy ice out of pushcarts, blasting hip-hop, and random hipsters. Izzy scowled. They were all stupid and could all go to hell.

“What’s up, ma,” some rando called from a stoop.

“Eat shit, dad,” Izzy replied.

“Whoa!”

She kept walking, covering up the ensuing curseout with her headphones and the dazzling trippy beats of DJ Taza. “I treat this / Like Imma beat this.”

A cluster of cop cars sat double- and triple-parked in front of the project house up ahead. Izzy crossed the street, narrowing her eyes at them. She had just enough time to get coffee and hop on the train to make it out to Summer Slam on time. Getting hassled by some dudebro from Long Island with a badge didn’t figure into her schedule. “Peace, piss. Treat, tryst. Heat, hiss.”

What the hell was wrong with Tee?

Truth was, she’d been acting strange for almost a month now. Strange like not quite there. Tee was usually the first one to go in for a kiss, the one vomiting up all the gooey lovey-dovey-type crap that normally would make Izzy roll her eyes and shake her head, but right about now? Some affection



would be nice, dammit. Izzy couldn't even remember the last time Tee had said "I love you." And sure, she couldn't remember the last time she'd said it either, but that wasn't the point! You established a rhythm and so that's how things worked.

Izzy scowled as she yanked open the door to the coffee spot on Bedford. Why did people have to change? The whole great thing about Tee was what a rock she was. Izzy got to be the moody one, the mad one, the weird one. Whatever she needed to be.

A cramp ripped through Izzy and she let out an audible growl before remembering she still had her headphones on. She cursed, pulling them down around her neck.

"Uh, can I help you?"

Izzy looked up.

A scrawny white kid stared over the counter at her. He wore a black baseball cap with an X on it (ironically, Izzy presumed) and a puffy vest over a Metallica T-shirt. His hand drifted toward the open mouth of the tip jar as if the money might magically make its way into Izzy's pocket.

"Lemme get a iced chocolate mochaccino with extra chocolate and two shots of espresso. To go. Hold the straw."

"Iced?"

"Excuse me?"

"Do ... you ... want ... it ... iced?"

Izzy just stared at him. "It's July, bruh. Nobody got time for your shit."

His eyes widened, then narrowed, then he went about his business putting the drink together while Izzy stood there seething.

"You know it's extra for the chocolate and espresso shots, right?"

Izzy blinked.

"Just letting you know," the barista said without looking up.

"I'm going to own you one day, Teddy," Izzy said quietly.

"What's that?"

"Like, literally own you. Not the coffee shop. You."

"Did you just call me Teddy?"

“And when you bore me, Imma eat you.”

“Jesus.”

“Give me my coffee, Ted.”

“My name’s not —”

Izzy slammed her palm on the counter so hard it upset a stack of organic ginger candies. Everyone in the place looked up.

The barista flinched, then quickly spun around, finished the foamy concoction, and handed it to Izzy.

“Three seventy-five,” he whispered.

Izzy threw a five on the counter. “Keep the change, Theodore.” She pulled her headphones on, walked out feeling both smug and shitty, and took a sip of her drink as she descended into the train station.

All the lush chocolate and bitter espresso swirled in with that gushy sweet whipped cream and made Izzy’s whole face tingle. She swiped her MetroCard and pushed through the turnstile as that flush of frosty joy swept through her chest, sent a sparkling chill cascading across her whole body. Perfection.

“Imma beat this / I’m defeatless / a beat fest / heat crest / I’m the best / ace every test / can’t be stressed / I’m unpressed.” Two businessmen gaped at her as she passed and she threw a snarl in right as the beat turned around. “Undaunted / I flaunt it.” The tunnel lit up and then the train rolled around the corner into view and came grinding and squealing into the station. “You want it / It’s iconic / it don’t come and go, it’s chronic.”

She stepped onto the train and the truth of the matter hammered down on her out of nowhere. Tee didn’t love her anymore. It was that simple. The lights seemed too bright and too dim at the same time. They seared her face, sent blobs of color dancing across the darkness of the tunnel out the window. It was freezing on the damn train; the AC must be on overdrive. Everything was wrong.

Izzy sat at the far end of the car, put her back against the wall and her feet up on the seat next to her. “You ain’t heard this / I’m like perfect /

Undiscovered but I deserve it.” She shook her head. “I deserve it.”

Everyone was staring again, but it didn’t matter.

Tee didn’t love her anymore.



A few stops from Coney Island, Izzy snapped out of a lyric-filled daze. The mochaccino had melted into a gooey mess, but it was still delicious, if kinda watery now. She glanced out the window. The last time she’d been out this way was the night Sierra made them all shadowshapers. Lotta good that had done.

“Imma treat this / like Imma beat this,” Izzy mumbled. She rubbed a hand across her face. Performing would bring her back to life. Onstage, everything else fell away. And Tee would come, and see her kill it in front of a bigger audience than she’d ever faced before, and night would be falling over the ocean and all the lights would find her in the midst of a darkening world and the words would spray off her tongue like their own beam of light, and they’d find Tee and remind her of their love.

And everything would be all the hell right.



“Whatsa matta, man?” Izzy asked, strolling up to the area behind the stage. Road crews and stressed-out managers paced back and forth, lugging equipment and looking for late performers.

Desmond Pocket shook his head, fists clenched at his hips. “Mi cyaan badda, Iz.” It was damn near a hundred degrees and the dude was still in his green blazer and wearing a damn tie.

“That’s not helpful, D. What’s going on?”

“Besides that yuh late as hell and I hadta play you in soundcheck and it wasn’t pretty, let mi tell yuh ...”

“Yikes, I can imagine.”

“Is di wutless organiza dem and dem rassclaat last-minute changes.”

Izzy raised her eyebrows. “Changes?”

“It some church group cosponsoring and they imposed a strict no-swearing policy on all performances.”

“*What?*”

“Mi know, trus’ me. Mi try fi argue dem down with every lawyerly trick in the book but they won’t budge.”

Onstage, some alt-emo-postpunk quartet called Slardibardfast whined about a girl that never loved them anyway. Inside Izzy, everything was slowly falling apart. “But ...” she started.

“Heyy, boo,” a tall girl in a bikini bottom and torn T-shirt called out as she strode past on long bronze legs. Izzy and Desmond both unleashed huge smiles and waved.

“Jeezum Peez,” Desmond groaned when she was gone. “No sah! Do I not make it abundantly clear that I am gay?”

Izzy scowled. “First of all: No, man, you do not.”

Desmond kissed his teeth. “Chuh!”

“Secondly: She was talking to me. And third: Yo! How Imma go up there and *not* swear?”

“Mi no know!”

“What I’m s’posta rhyme ‘Horcrux’ with, bruh?”

Slardibardfast wrapped up their set with an uninspired rendition of “The Star-Spangled Banner.” Izzy shook her head. “This is trash, man. This whole stupid day. Like ... what else —”

“Yuh got my text that BimBop can’t show, right?”

Izzy boggled. “What? Who’s gonna DJ for me?”

“You a go haffi use di songs on yuh phone. I left a message to let you know, you didn’t get it?”

Izzy pulled out her cell and swiped to turn it on. Nothing happened. “What the ...” She tried again. And again. Her heart slowly turned to goo. “The battery ... shit.”

Desmond’s eyes went wide. “You have no music? You on next, Iz!”

Izzy made a gurgly noise. Tee was out there somewhere, with her faraway heart, and so was basically the whole entire world. The crowd stretched way into the darkness of the beach. Some corny MC asked if they were having a good time and a huge roar erupted.

Izzy whirled around, scanning the backstage area for a friendly face, and glimpsed a familiar spiky hairdo. “Juan?” She almost burst into tears as Sierra’s older brother turned around and flashed his goofy grin.

“Izzy? Oh, snap!” He came running over and hugged her. The rest of his thrasher-salsa band stood in a circle by the refreshments table, laughing at some inside joke. “What’s good?”

“Juan, listen, man. I’m up next and, like ... everything’s going wrong.” *Hold it together*, Izzy warned herself, hearing her own voice quiver. “Like everything. You know these fools don’t want us to swear?”

Juan rolled his eyes. “I heard. Good thing all our songs are in Spanish so they won’t know. We adding a couple ‘coños’ and ‘chingas’ in for good measure, actually.”

Izzy laughed and felt some of the shakiness leave her body. “Can you ... I have no DJ and my phone’s dead, man. Where my tracks are. Do you guys think you could maybe ...”

Juan lit up. “Back you up? Back up the mighty King Impervious? At a huge cheesy summer fest where we can’t swear? We would literally love nothing more. Hey, Pulpo, Kaz! C’mere!”

Izzy almost burst into tears right then and there, but she had a show to do. Desmond nodded approvingly as Juan ran off to gather his crew.

“Nicely done, Iz. Dat’s why dey call yuh di King, I guess.”

“It ain’t done yet,” Izzy said. “Now comes the hard part.”

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Slardibardfast agreed to lend Culebra their gear, so Juan and the guys made a big show of strolling onstage real slow and badass-like. Then Kaz ripped into a rackity-clack marching beat and Pulpo dropped a bassline so deep and dance-demanding it seemed like the whole ocean might get up and

shake its ass. Juan kept a cool *wukka-chikka* warbling from his Stratocaster, Shaft-style, and then Izzy took a deep breath and walked out into the lights.

She didn't know what would come out of her mouth. All she knew was the day had been long and impossible — downright *evil*, dammit — and the world seemed to be plotting against her, and all she had to fight back with were her words.

The crowd applauded as she took the mic, probably more for the grandiosity of the whole entrance than because any of them knew who the hell she was.

“What the hell is up, Coney Island!” Izzy yelled. Her voice boomed out across the sky. “Oops. Does hell count as a swear?” The crowd erupted into laughter and cheering for real now, and she knew they were hers. She closed her eyes, let Kaz's clackity-clack and Pulpo's thunder rolls burst through her. Clutched the mic. Began:

“I treat this / Like Imma beat this.” The crowd fell into rhythm beneath her, hands raised. “You just hors d'oeuvres / I'm the main meat, sis.” They roared.

“I'm seamless / you teamless / you change shapes when you excited —” With a sharp snare hit, the whole band ground to a halt. Even the crowd was quiet. “— like a penis.”

The whole beach exploded.

“Imma complete this / you can't delete this,” Izzy rapped as Culebra fell back in behind her. “I got a whole lotta ships / you fleetless.”

Beside her, Juan laughed and signaled Pulpo; they both went into overdrive, smashing out note after note in a static-laced deluge. Izzy took a breath, then let loose on the mic: “Mosta these fools ain't a friendta me / Talk trash then find out they gotta bendta me / See I'm the king and you can never bring an endta me / I'm in the end zone, every move you make's a penalty.”

Izzy stopped to catch her breath and take in the hugeness of the crowd, who now bopped as one gigantic writhing snake.

“Y'all feeling this dish I cooked up fresh for ya?”



The roar was damn near deafening.

But Tee wasn't out there. Izzy felt it in her gut. The whole world had shown except the only girl that mattered. Izzy grabbed the mic, closed her eyes, and released.



Later, she walked along through the darkness of the beach, sneakers in her hand, the cool sand streaming between her toes. The roar of the crowd became a distant hush beneath the crashing sea; the moon hung low and sent sparkling fractals of itself dancing across the night waves.

Up ahead, someone stood facing the water. Izzy woulda recognized that big ol' pile of hair anywhere. "Sierra?"

She turned, wiped her face. "Hey, Iz! Amazing show!"

"You cryin', Si?"

Sierra shrugged. "Nah, I'm alright."

"And my name is Leonardo DiCaprio."

They both laughed. "You right," Sierra said. "But I don't even know how to talk about it."

"Good," Izzy said. "I don't know how to talk about my shit either. Can we be noncommunicative and salty together or you want some space?"

"Nah, join me, sis!" Sierra plopped her butt into the sand and Izzy sat beside her, leaning back on her elbows. They let the crashing waves fill the silence between them for a few minutes.

"It's Tee, isn't it?" Sierra finally said.

Izzy made a face at the sky. "I don't think she ..." She shook her head. The words were there, but they wouldn't come out. "She didn't come, did she?"

"Didn't see her," Sierra said. "But she coulda been somewhere else. It's a lotta folks here."

"Nah. She didn't make it," Izzy said. "I can feel it."

"Alright, Luke Skywalker."

Izzy let a little chuckle out.

“You really did kill it, though. And Culebra was in rare form, even for them. You and my brother should collab more often.”

“You know, I think we might. That beat the hell outta playin’ with a prerecorded track, to be honest.”

“BimBop gonna be mad.”

“BimBop shoulda showed his ass up.”

Izzy heard soft footsteps and jingling keys coming toward them through the sand. She knew that walk. She closed her eyes.

“Iz?”

“Hey, Tee,” Sierra said.

Izzy swallowed hard.

“Izzy?”

The waves, the wind, the world.

She took a deep breath. “What, Tee?”

“I’m ... I’m sorry, babe. I tried to get here on time, I just —”

Izzy was standing, pointing a finger into Tee’s chest before she even realized she’d opened her eyes. “You *tried*, Trejean? It’s been *two hours* since I rocked the mic, and now you wanna show up talkin’ ’bout you *tried*?”

“I’m so —”

“Don’t even disrespect me by apologizing, Tee. Don’t do it. If you were really sorry, you’d shown up on time.”

“Iz, I’m sorry!”

Sierra stood up. “I should go. You guys —”

“Nah,” Izzy said. “You stay, Sierra. Imma go. This ain’t the place for me.” She started to walk away.

“Wait,” Tee said. “Iz, seriously, wait!”

Izzy spun around. “You don’t love me anymore, Tee. It’s obvious. And you couldn’t even respect me enough to be the one to tell me. I had to say it first.”

Tee’s eyes grew wide and watery. “Iz ... listen ... I’m ... I’m sorry.”

Izzy shook her head and stormed off, letting the night wrap around her.

# THREE

“Don’t follow,” Sierra said.

Tee whirled around. She’d taken four steps after Izzy. Her mouth was open but nothing had come out. Sierra stood with her arms around herself, the dark ocean behind her, the moon just over her shoulder; she had heartache etched all over her face.

“But ... why not?” Inside Tee, a little vision of Izzy became smaller and smaller in the darkness. Soon she’d be gone.

“Because she just told you you don’t love her anymore and you didn’t disagree.”

“Because I ... I mean ...”

“Exactly,” Sierra said. “You have no idea what you feel and so you’re just gonna stand there starting sentences that don’t have an ending, and then what’ll that get ya? Everyone’ll just be more confused than they already are.”

“Damn.” Tee let her shoulders sag. The tiny Izzy inside her vanished into the night. She sighed. “I ... I just ...”

Sierra raised her eyebrows, her lips pressed together. “That’s alright, Tee, you can get out all your nonsensical half-formed thoughts here. This is the place for that.” She turned back to the ocean and sat.

Tee let her breath slow down. Took a step toward the water. “I just ... I can’t even ... and, like ...”

“Girl, I know exactly what you mean.”

A part of Tee was still poised to run after Izzy. She squelched it. Sierra was right: She had no idea what she'd say. None of this was going like it was supposed to. She was gonna show up, apologize, take her razzing, or at worst, Izzy might catch some feelings and have one of her tantrums and then Tee would take care of her. They'd go for a romantic night walk on the beach and that'd be that. Tee and Izzy in full effect again.

But this?

Tee shook her head. "You know how like ... but then sometimes ... and you're just ... ya know? Without any kinda ... whatsoever."

Sierra nodded sagely. "Precisely."

The moon dipped behind a cloud.

"Sierra, can I ask you something unrelated to relationship-drama stuff?"

"Sure, Tee."

"It's, uh, about shadowshaping."

Sierra just stared out at the water.

"When you see the spirits, right? Do they have, like, faces and stuff, or they just glowing shadows?"

"At first they was just shadows. Then as I got better at stuff, I started to differentiate them. Especially after —" She nodded out at the darkness over the waves, where her late grandma had appeared to her one night like some kinda Puerto Rican cigar-smoking Obi-Wan Kenobi, bathed in golden light and full of wisdom and secrets.

"Musta been hard," Tee said quietly. "Being passed the mantle of Lucera, but not having anyone to show you the ropes."

Sierra nodded, her face tight. "Still hard."

Tee let a few moments of just crashing waves and screaming night birds pass. Then she asked, "You can hear 'em?"

"Who, the spirits? Yeah, I guess so. Some of 'em don't speak, or don't know how yet. Some are loud and clear, though. At first it was just their song. Once I, you know ..." Her voice trailed off.

*Became the supernova sun in a spinning shadow spirit galaxy,* Tee silently finished for her. "Yeah."

“After that, everything got much clearer. I can see through the spirits’ eyes, hear ’em like they talkin’ inside me,” Sierra said. “Some of ’em. Some don’t or can’t do much; they just hang there. If there’s logic or rules to it all, I ain’t figured it out yet. I don’t think they have either, to be honest. And when they died violently, usually they can’t remember their lives, or only have scraps of them. It can mute their powers, especially if they don’t know who they are, their own names.” She shook her head. “It’s a lot, sometimes, I ... I’m still learning how to balance it all out.”

The moon emerged from behind the clouds, and Tee realized how sad her friend looked. She wanted to hug her, tell her everything was gonna be alright, but it felt like a lie and Sierra didn’t seem to want to be hugged.

“Why you askin’ all this stuff anyway?”

Tee shrugged. The ghost girl had entrusted her with the secret of her existence, and that truth hung in Tee’s mouth for a second before she swallowed it. “Just realized, you know, doing this newspaper stuff, and with Manny and all, it got me thinking how little I know about shadowshaping, even though it’s in me.”

Sierra made a noncommittal grunt. It always scared Tee how easy it was for her to lie. She halfway wished Sierra would call bullshit and they could just talk about what was really going on, but that still felt like a tiny candle inside her, one that would be blown out as soon as she let anyone else know it existed.

“Manny never really got into shadowshaping, right?” Tee asked.

“He was part of the original shadowshaper crew with my grandpa,” Sierra said. “But he kinda moved on from it along with everyone else when all that bad shit went down with Wick and them. I don’t really know how skilled he was as a ’shaper, cuz he never wanted to talk about it with me. You sure nothin’ going on?”

“It’s just so much loss,” Tee said. “Your grandpa’s out of it, and Lucera gone. Manny dead. The rest of ’em that Wick got. And all that knowledge with each one of them. All that shadowshaping wisdom, on top of all the other stuff they had and were ...”



Sierra nodded, then shook her head, eyes closed. “Girl, I know. It’s been on me, that very thing. Cuz here I am just trying to put together what few puzzle pieces we got, and ain’t nobody around to ask even. Shit’s troubling.”

“But there’s you, Sierra. And you may not have a lot of info but you got skills. And there’s Robbie ...”

Sierra rolled her eyes, and Tee knew enough to let that one go.

“Anyway, there’s you! And I know we keep saying we’re gonna learn, but, like, for real, let’s do a practice session. So we can get good and figure out what we gotta figure out as a team, you know?”

“I’m down.” Sierra stood up, threw a last look out at the sea, and turned toward the boardwalk. “When you wanna start?”

“Tomorrow,” Tee said, probably a little too quickly. “I just gotta check in with these intrepid young reporterlings I’m the boss’a now and try’n catch up with Ol’ Drasco for an interview. I should be free in the afternoon-eveningish.”

Sierra raised an eyebrow as they made their way across the beach. “You gonna make nice with Miss Iz?”

“Girl,” Tee drawled. “All I *do* is make nice.”

Sierra rolled her eyes. “If you say sooo.”



The next afternoon, emptiness filled the basement. It took over everything; the ghost girl’s absence was everywhere. Tee had tried to ignore her pounding heart as she opened the rusted metal door and walked down the short cement stairway. She’d entered into the cool darkness, hands outstretched for the light switch. No blue glow simmered in the corner. No ghost girl awaited her. And now, two whole hours filled with not-getting-much-done later, Tee, still alone, pulled out her phone for, like, the eightieth time.

Still nothing.

Tee had sent Izzy a late-night *I'm sorry* and hoped that would at least smooth things over enough to get a convo going. Izzy's furrowed brow and watery eyes kept surfacing in Tee's mind, and then she'd go back to halfway doing whatever she'd been doing, and then she'd remember that the ghost girl was gone too, and then she'd want to cry, and then she'd pretend to get stuff done again, and then —

"Whaddup, T-killah!" Coruscant called from the doorway.

Tee damn near hollered from shock, but recovered her composure before he'd come all the way downstairs. "My name's Tee, bruh. Tee or Trejean, those ya options."

"Damn, alright. I came to check in."

"Have a seat."

"In the fancy barber chair?"

"Nah, that's the editor throne. There's a foldout by the printing press."

"Cold world."

Tee shrugged and shook her head once at the empty screen in front of her, the blinking cursor that just seemed to mock her. She put the plastic tip of Manny's still-unsmoked Malagueña mini between her teeth, crossed the room, and sat in the barber chair. Coruscant had spun his foldout backward and straddled it. "Sooooo ..." he started.

"Oh boy."

"Shut up, I got something for real."

"Go on."

"Pom-poms."

Tee stared at him.

"You think I jest, but it's a thing. Well, it's gonna be a thing."

"Pom-poms like sis-boom-bah?"

"On hats, though."

"No."

"Whaddya mean *no*? I'm the fashion correspondent and I'm tellin' you, it's gonna be a thing, Tee. I swear."

“Have you actually *seen* anyone wearing these pom-pom hats on the mean streets of Bedford-Stuyvesant or did you just check your fashion Magic 8 Ball?”

“Nah, I mean, I’m calling it. I’m saying, they the *next* big thing, know what I mean?”

“I don’t, and I plan to keep it that way.”

“Tee —”

“Coruscant, man, you’re a reporter. Your job is to report on what’s happening, not make some shit up and call it a trend.”

“But —”

“That’s not how this works. Now go walk the streets some and look around you and interview some kids and see what’s hot. Got it?”

“What’s poppin’, mi gente?” Rafael called as he walked in and closed the door behind him.

“Not pom-poms,” Tee said.

“Huh?”

Coruscant sighed. “Alright, alright. I’m on it.”

“Don’t make this more complicated than it has to be. You got my coffee, Raffi?”

“Claro que sí.” He passed her a warm blue-and-white paper cup. “Extra cream and sugar like you said, mi jefa.”

“Did you just call me a heffa?”

“*Jefa!* Jefa! Boss-lady.”

Tee side-eyed him. “Alright, I’ll allow it. What you got? Later, Coruscant. Go get some good stories!”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah.” Coruscant traded an overcomplicated high five with Rafael on his way to the door.

“And no more fake Frenchy!”

For a moment, sunlight flooded the dank basement. “Aw, man!” Then the door slammed shut. Tee allowed the image of the ghost girl to spin once through her mind, then she checked her phone — a text from her mom

about picking up coconut milk on her way home; silence from Izzy — and sighed.

“Woman troubles?” Rafael asked, sipping his own coffee.

“You have no idea.”

He smirked. “I might. I’m actually very good with relationship problems, in spite of appearing to be just your average papi.”

“Just Your Average Papi gonna be my new reggaeton band name, just FYI. Gimme your scoop, Dr. Ruth.”

“Summer league baseball! Almost everything is as you’d expect: Halsey Street Hobards swept the qualifying rounds; Woodhull Warriors still down seven. In the Bodega League, the Dominicans crushed the Yemenites by twelve, whaat!” He fell into a smooth two-step and Tee rolled her eyes.

“¡Mi gente! ¡La Rrrrepublica!”

“Except?”

Rafael executed a spin, jumped in the air, and landed with finger guns pointed at Tee. “Except what?”

“You said *almost* everything is as I’d expect in the summer leagues. I await the aberration.” She chewed the plastic tip of Manny’s ’gueña mini and tried not to scowl.

“Oh, right! The Pistoleros lost.”

“Say word?”

“Lost bad. To the Baker’s Dozen, no less.”

Tee gaped, almost dropping the mini. The Pistoleros were literally undefeated, the best teen ball players Bed-Stuy had ever known. They’d been written up twice in the *Times* and an NPR reporter had done a story at one of their games. There was no way a washed-up bunch of losers like the Baker’s Dozen could shut them out. “How?”

“Simple: No Cortez.”

“What?” Lani Cortez was the linchpin of the whole team. She pitched more no-hitters than anyone could keep track of. Yeah, the world was gonna know she was a star one day, but as far as the neighborhood was concerned,

she'd already risen to the stratosphere. Last year, a mural had gone up with her face next to Jackie Robinson and Malcolm X.

Rafael shrugged. "Weird, right? She just didn't show up."

"Did you ask anyone if they knew where she was?"

"Of course, mi jefa. I'm a reporter, right?"

"And?"

"Nobody knew! They were all stunned as everyone else. I think that's why they lost, to be honest. They looked shook."

"That don't sound right at all."

He sipped his coffee. "Word."

"Alright, you got some more games tonight?" A chirp from her pocket announced a new text message. Tee forced herself not to check.

"The Pulaski Pushers versus the Cannonball Garveys. It's gonna be fire."

"Have fun. I want five hundred words by tomorrow morning." She dapped him and he started toward the door. "And Raffi."

"Hm?"

"Lemme know if anything comes up about Cortez."

"You got it, mi jefa."

Tee was up and across the room before the door closed behind him. Where was the ghost girl? How could she have just disappeared like this? Well, that was a stupid question, Tee thought, getting on her hands and knees and peering under the printing press. *She's a ghost, Tee. She can do what she wants.*

The text. Tee pulled out her phone, quelling the panic. It was her mom, asking her to bring some condensed milk for her uncle Ed, who'd holed up in his room again and wouldn't come out. She shot off a quick *k*, then looked around the room.

The Linotype! Tee stood up suddenly. She wouldn't still be in the machine, but what if ... She bolted across the room, cursing herself for not looking earlier. The typing had stopped yesterday after that HELP, and no matter how long Tee stared or waited or pretended not to be paying

attention, no more words appeared. Minutes, then hours passed, the time of Izzy's show coming and going, and Tee's stomach turned itself in knots, wondering what the ghost girl needed help with, what she could possibly do to help her. Finally, she'd left in an anxious flurry and hurried off to the train to apologize.

Now she gaped at the metal slugs in the little window with her mouth slightly open. Three more letters had slid in next to the word HELP:

HER.

Tee squinted at it. "Who?" she said out loud.

"Hello?" Mina's voice came from outside.

"Jesus!" Tee gasped, trying to control her screaming heartbeat, her fast, ragged breath.

"What's wrong?" Mina's wide-open face as she stepped into the dim light looked as terrified as Tee felt.

"Nothing, I just ... Nothing. Got spooked is all." Tee crossed the room, hoping it wasn't super obvious she'd just been gaping at the Linotype.

"Yeah." Mina walked over to the huge printing press, running a finger idly along its great metal arms. "I know some messed-up stuff musta happened down here."

*Manny's gaping mouth, his cool skin when they found him sprawled out in the basement ...*

Tee nodded and wrapped her arms around herself. Why was the ghost girl appearing to her alone? And where had she gone? Who did she want Tee to help if not herself?

"You want my update?" Mina asked.

She nodded again, found the coffee Rafael had brought her. Lukewarm already. She frowned.

"Tee. What is it?"

Tee tried to shrug it off, all those memories, the haunting questions, the silence from Izzy, but it wouldn't go away. "A lot," she finally said. "Too much."

"Want me to leave?"

She shook her head.

“Wanna talk?”

She put the coffee down, rubbed her face. “No. Thank you, though, seriously. Just tell me what you got; I’ll be aight.”

Mina eyed her. “Mmkay, Tee. But lemme know if you change your mind. I know you don’t know me that well, but ... I know how to keep a secret.”

Tee looked up. Why had Mina said that? Did she know something about what was happening? *Secret* was the first thing Tee had felt, no, *known* about the ghost girl. It had been like a whisper inside her bones, a simple, emphatic *shhhh* that was louder than any scream.

“Tee?”

“Just tell me what you got, Mina. For real. I’m fine.” It came out snappier than she meant it to, she could tell from the startled look on Mina’s face.

“Okay, so I spoke to three of my neighbors; they all lived in East New York and Flatbush back in the day. Just did preliminary interviews to see where they’re at, and yeah, looks like it’s gonna be some interesting stuff. Two of ’em are openly bigots, like *where’s your hood*–type mess. The other really wants to get it right but, you know, doesn’t really have a lot of reference points, if that makes sense?”

“Wow, Mina, that’s good work. And fast.” Tee allowed the warmth back into her voice, caught Mina’s eye, and managed to smile.

“Aaand I talked to my completely batshit grandma. She, uh ... collects dolls? Like a lot of them? It’s really, really creepy. I’ve honestly felt like there’s something seriously messed-up going on with her since I was little.”

“Is that why you love serial killers so hard?” Tee covered her mouth. The thought hadn’t sounded as insensitive when it was coming together in her mind. “Sorry, that was —”

Mina waved her off with a sad smile. “It’s fine, really.” She giggled, which was kinda creepy, but Tee was just relieved the moment had passed. “You’re probably right, to be honest. I’d never really thought of it like that,

but ... I mean ... my mom died when I was eight and I never even met my dad, so Grandma Tess was all I had and she's just ... You know the evil octopus lady from *Little Mermaid*?"

Tee let out a laugh. "Ursula? That's your grandma? Damn, girl."

"Like Ursula after renal failure and a few strokes, plus an affinity for Tony Bennett."

"And a doll collection."

Mina covered her eyes. "And a *doll collection*!" They both laughed.

Tee felt a little bit of life seep back into her veins. "That's a whole movie right there. Or a book. You gotta write it one day. Even if you gotta fictionalize it or whatever. The names have been changed to protect the completely maniacal."

"It would only work if Tim Burton directed."

With a sizzle and flash of blue, the ghost girl spilled out of the darkness over the Linotype. Tee caught the gasp trying to escape from her throat, but only barely. "Alright," she said as Mina's giggling subsided. "Do me a favor, though? Can you check up on Lani Cortez for me?"

"Who, the pitcher?"

"Mmhmm. Just pop by the playing field, see if anyone's seen her today. She lives on Malcolm X and Putnam, ask around over there."

Mina's mouth moved all the way to one side of her face. "This the crime beat that you weren't gonna put me on?"

"I sure as hell hope not," Tee said. "Just following up on something. Lemme know what you find out."

Mina got her stuff together and headed out. Tee waited a beat, took a long, shaky breath, then turned slowly to face the ghost girl.



## FOUR

Down past the bustle and traffic of Atlantic Ave. and the fruit stands, mosques, and fish markets of Fulton Street, a brick school building looms over a wide-open yard. Basketball courts line the edges, and beyond that, a playground sits in the shadows of a small enclave tucked into a corner of the block. Little kids scream and run back and forth through the schoolyard like flocking birds during the day; at night, teenagers play ball, fall in love, get high.

But it was a Wednesday in July, and the whole world was over at the Diamonds to find out who would rule the summer league this year, which was surely what Sierra had in mind when she told everyone to meet up at the yard at seven thirty and bring their chalk.

“You smart, mon capitán,” Izzy said. “Timed this right.” They stood in a loose semicircle around Sierra: Jerome, taller and wider than all of ’em and always ready with a quick one-liner; Nydia, the Columbia University librarian who had helped Sierra unravel the secret history of shadowshaping and had been studying New York’s hidden magic for years; María, Sierra’s mom, who looked every bit the elementary school teacher she was in that pantsuit with her hair pulled back in a tight bun; and Izzy, who was trying to ignore the gnawing realization that Tee wasn’t coming.

“Who we missin’?” Sierra asked.

“Where’s Juan?” María asked. “He forget he’s a shadowshaper?”

Sierra rolled her eyes and crooked her fingers into bunny-ear quotation marks. “Culebra rehearsal.”

“Where’s Bennie?” Nydia said. Bennie was Sierra’s best friend, and it wasn’t like her to miss a practice.

“She at some Super Saiyan dorkmeister overnight camp upstate for the week,” Sierra said. “Learning how to make robots or computers or planets or something.”

“Where’s Robbie?” Izzy asked. Robbie was Sierra’s maybe kinda sorta possibly sometimes boyfriend, and he’d been shadowshaping longer than any of them.

Sierra rolled her eyes. “Robbie’s ... Robbie. Where’s Tee?” She didn’t look at Izzy when she said it, but everyone else did.

Izzy snarled at them. “I ain’t my girlfriend’s keeper, y’all.”

“You literally are, though,” Jerome pointed out.

She flipped him off without taking her eyes off Sierra. “You call her?”

“I texted,” Sierra said. “She didn’t respond. But she’s the one who was saying we should get a practice session together last night on the beach.”

*Last night.* Izzy had spent the whole train ride home from Coney Island inside a heavy cloud of gloom. Wave after wave of cramps punctuated spiraling breakup scenarios. At home, she’d turned off her phone, dreamt of nothing at all, and spent the day trying to ignore her little brother and mom’s attempts to cheer her up. She hadn’t even been able to write any rhymes. Trash, the whole situation. If she saw Tee now, she’d demand a quick ending to the whole thing, since the girl couldn’t even work herself up to deny that she’d fallen out of love. Pull the damn Band-Aid off and let the exsanguination commence: That was Izzy’s take on it.

“Let’s get estarted,” María said. “If I don’t get home by nine, Dominic will try to cook, and we all know how that will go.”

“Ugh,” Sierra said. “Alright, so chalk out, everybody.”

Izzy fished the dusty nub from her big camouflage cargo shorts. Beside her, María Santiago carefully unpackaged a fresh pastel-colored box.

“Show-off,” Izzy whispered.

María made a demure frown. “I take my craft seriously, is all. Unlike some people, nubby.”

Izzy could've pointed out that up until a month ago, María had pretended the family's spiritual legacy was a figment of her father's demented mind, but she decided to let it slide. "I guess we'll see what's what on the court."

"When you're ready," Sierra said, "get drawin'. Start with something simple. Don't have to be no spine-covered turtle warriors or nothin', just a hook or a circle will do for now."

Everyone squatted in the darkening yard. "Damn, I was totally gonna do a spiny turtle warrior too," Jerome grumbled.

Izzy dragged her chalk across the gravel, swerving it sharply to form a vicious question-mark shape and then closing it off with a sharp point. "Pow," she muttered to herself. "And now ..." She made a star at the point to show the glinting steel that would dismember any fool who got in its way. "Sha-ziiing."

"Oh, that's a very peaceful-looking night sky," María said, glancing over from her own sketch of an ever-expanding swirl. "The moon is a little crooked though, no offense."

"At least I didn't draw a busted, off-center tumbleweed."

María flashed a menacing grin. "Mmm, just you wait."

"Nothing complicated, I said," Sierra called. "What even ... is going on there?"

Jerome had scrawled a whole unintelligible shape — maybe a monster? Maybe a city? Probably just a big scribble of random lines and shapes. A few — were those trees? — lined a building, while a lopsided claw emerged from a window. He shrugged. "I just ... I dunno, I got excited. Haven't messed around with chalk since I was like ten, y'all."

"Looks like a bad dream," Nydia said with an approving nod. "Nice." She'd created a trio of elaborate, sharp-angled abstract shapes, each one a different color. They looked like they could fit together like Voltron and whup any chalk drawing they wanted to. Izzy made a mental note to steer clear of Nydia's stuff.

“So, the spirits are ready,” Sierra said. Izzy felt the hairs on the back of her neck stand at attention. She looked up from the drawings. The shadows around them had stretched and grown and now pulsed with a gentle blue light. Seven of them stood in a wide circle around the 'shapers. Izzy caught her breath. She'd seen them that night on the beach last month, but then they'd been swirling through the air and seemed far off and beautiful, a ghostly light show.

Now they stood just a few feet away and ready to dive through her into the drawings.

“Coño ...” María whispered.

“I know it's kinda intense,” Sierra said. “Believe me. First time I really had 'em close by for real was in the middle of Prospect Park, and I definitely thought I was gonna die. But these spirits are here to work with us. They're here to guide us and protect us, and I promise you're in no danger. Now ...”

One spirit launched forward, a silent streak of illuminated shadow, and dove into Nydia's raised hand. She gasped, then slapped one of her drawings. It spun to life, cavorting in wild circles across the gravel.

“Well, there it is,” Sierra said. “Not so bad, right?”

María leaned close to Izzy. “Now *there* is the show-off.”

Izzy snickered.

“Sorry, y'all,” Nydia said, hunching up her shoulders. “I been waiting like five years for a chance to 'shape. Couldn't hold out any longer.”

“Honestly,” Izzy whispered back to María, “she's so fine she could show off any time she wants, and if she shrugged like that, it would be alright with me.”

María rolled her eyes. “Sinvergüenza.”

“I'll take that as a compliment,” Izzy said. “Whatever it means.”

“Alright!” Sierra clapped her hands together and smiled wide. “Let's try it!”

Izzy glanced up at the two shadow spirits closest to her. One was tall with long arms, the way a lot of them seemed to look. The other was a little

rounder with some curves that reminded Izzy of Tee. She shook her head, forcing out the thought, then steeled herself and raised an arm. For a solid ten seconds, the two spirits just stood there, waving slightly in the summer breeze. Then the shorter one hovered forward, slowly at first but then faster and faster as it flung across the darkness on smooth strides. Izzy closed her eyes just as a smooth burst of coolness spread through her hand and wrist. It was like someone had emptied a pint of ice cream into a hole in her palm. She shuddered, and then remembered what she was supposed to do. Her eyes flew open and she slapped the chalk drawing. The icy sludge seemed to slow inside her, and then suddenly it flushed along her arm, and her chalk drawing lit up, trembled, then evaporated into a poof of dust.

“Dammit, dammit, dammit!”

“No luck, superstar?” María smirked.

Izzy sighed.

“Hush, mi vida, it takes practice, you know.”

“I guess.”

María raised her hand for the tall shadow. When she slapped the drawing, her spiral maze vibrated like it was being hit by a series of tiny earthquakes, but not much else. “See?”

“At least you got the spirit in the dang picture without exploding it,” Izzy grumbled.

Sierra walked up, arms crossed over her chest. “How we doin’?”

“Strugglin’,” Izzy said. “But your mom’s out here winnin’.”

“Ah.” María shrugged off the compliment. “I got it in the genes, et cetera, et cetera.”

Sierra nodded, eyebrows raised. “Not bad, Mami.”

All three of Nydia’s swirling shapes fizzed past, followed by a struggling, shuddering tangle of sharp lines and errant scribbles. “Erm ...” Sierra said. “What’s going on with your guy there, Jerome?”

Jerome shook his head. “It’s ... it’s ... unique. Is all.”

“That’s for sure,” Izzy said.

The remaining spirits around them, who had been observing the shenanigans with occasional nods and maybe even chuckles, all perked up at once and whirled toward the far entrance to the park.

Izzy squinted into the darkness. “What is it?”

“Someone’s coming,” Jerome said. “A few someones.”

The dark figures moved toward them at a jog. They were wearing baseball uniforms, Izzy realized.

“Trey?” Jerome said. “Whaddup, man?” He crossed the distance and traded a pound with the guy in front, a light-skinned dude with a goatee.

“We lettin’ the whole hood know,” Trey said, then he stopped to catch his breath. “It’s Cortez.”

“What about her?” Izzy asked.

“She missin’,” said another kid, his high-pitched voice holding back a sob. “My sister.” Two boys came up beside him and patted his back.

“It’s alright, Bean,” one of them said. “We gonna find her, man.”

“Day and a half now,” Trey confirmed, still panting. “Ain’t nobody seen her. We got creamed last night by the Baker’s Dozen and —”

“Y’all let the Baker’s Dozen —” Jerome started. Izzy smacked his arm and he shut up.

“Last we saw her was yesterday ’round noon,” Bean said. “She had lunch with me and Mama, and it was weird she missed the game, but we thought she was spending the night at Butt Jenny’s. Neither of ’em were answering their phones. Turns out Jenny was off with Gary and hadn’t seen Lani either and then Lani didn’t show up at the game tonight.” He shook his head, his frown widening across his face. “And now she’s nowhere.”

*Nowhere.* Izzy felt the truth of that expand inside her like a slow flood. She didn’t know Lani well, but the city around them suddenly seemed impossibly huge, a forest. How could anyone hope to find anyone else in this mess?

“Dios mío,” María said. “Did anyone go to the cops?”

“Just now,” Trey said, “but they said there’s a forty-eight-hour minimum waiting period before they can file a report.”

“Comemierdas,” María muttered. “¿Y ahora?”

“They ain’t gonna help us, Mrs. Santiago,” Trey said. “We already know. So we got all the summer league teams organized into search crews and folks out there scouring the Stuy tonight. That’s the best we can do.”

María nodded briskly. “Sierra, call your godfather. Bean, where are your parents right now?”

“They with one of the search crews — the Marcy Projectiles, I think.”

“Call ’em. Tell ’em to meet us by the precinct. Sierra, Nydia, you two come with me. Jerome, join the search crew. Izzy —”

“I’m with you,” Izzy said. “Let’s roll.”



“I’m asking you to say exactly what you said to me again.” Neville’s voice was calm, but Izzy could hear the hell it promised.

“Look,” the officer said for about the twentieth time in as many minutes. Izzy adjusted her phone slightly to make sure the angle was right. She was livestreaming to about twenty thousand very agitated viewers on Hoozit, and Neville had told her to make sure she got every minute and as clear a shot as possible without being seen. “I already told you guys that we can’t do anything tonight. I’m sure Miss ...” His voice trailed off.

Neville stared at him for almost a full minute. Behind them, a group of searchers combed Von King Park. Lani’s mom and dad and brother stood on one side of Neville, with María, Sierra, Nydia, and Izzy on the other.

“Cortez,” Neville finally said, his voice cold steel. “Lani Cortez.”

“Right. She’s probably at a friend’s house or with a —”

“She ain’t!” Bean yelled. “All her friends are out looking for her like y’all should be doing!”

“Our daughter doesn’t have a boyfriend,” Lani’s dad said, “Officer ...” He peered over Neville’s shoulder at the cop’s chest. “Buford.”

Officer Buford held up both hands and raised his eyebrows. “Look, kids these days, you never know wha —”

“¡A carajo!” Mr. Cortez yelled, shoving forward and winding his fist back. Neville was faster, though; he threw his long body between them, catching Mr. Cortez’s right arm and holding him off.

“Easy, easy ...” Neville said. “We need you out here lookin’, not in there facing felony assault charges, my man.”

Buford had taken two large steps back and had his hand on his service revolver. “Disperse from this area immediately,” he yelled. “I could book you right now for attempted assault on a —”

“Alright, alright, alright,” Neville said, holding Mr. Cortez away from the doorway with both hands. “C’mon, man.”

“You find my daughter!” Cortez yelled over his wife’s sobs. “Do your damn job!”

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“Goddammit!” Neville shouted once he and Izzy had rounded a corner away from the others. He kicked a scrunched-up soda can, ricocheting it off the wall of the precinct. They’d split up into twos to comb the neighborhood, and it was only now that Izzy realized how much effort Neville had been exerting to hold it together over the past half hour. He dragged those long fingers down his face and punched the air once before leaning on a recycling bin and massaging his temples.

Izzy had never seen Neville even mildly vexed, let alone throwing a complete shit fit. The man’s entire body was a coiled weapon, and while she believed he would never do anything to hurt her, she kept an arm’s length between them. Neville shook his head, pulled out a Conejo, and lit it, offering Izzy the pack without looking at her.

“Nah, man. Cigarettes are filth; why the hell would I wanna put that in my body?”

Neville nodded with a severe frown. “You right, you right.”

“You wanna ... you wanna talk about it?”

He shook his head, pressed his eyes shut. Shook his head again. Squeezed the top of his nose. When he opened his eyes they were watery



and red. He gave Izzy one of the most haunted looks she'd ever seen, then startled her even more by smiling.

"I ain't gonna hurt you, Iz, damn. Can Uncle Neville have some emotions too?"

Izzy took a step closer. "Yeah, but ... damn."

He smiled again, wiped his eyes. Shook his head one more time. Izzy pulled herself up on the recycling bin next to him. Her sneakers dangled over the pavement where his shiny alligator skins were firmly planted. Neville took a drag and sighed it out into the night. His long face tensed, then settled back into the easy, unfazed demeanor she'd always known it to bear — his mask rebuilding itself.

"You know what's wild? This searching thing ain't gonna find her." He shook his head, the lost look from a few moments ago vanished entirely.

"And I ain't sayin' we shouldn't do it. I'm glad we are. But it's for us more than Lani, is all."

"Whatchu mean?"

"This ain't Maine. We ain't in the woods. Lani ain't gonna be in a tree or lost, you know? But folks need to *do* something when tragedy hit, otherwise we lose our minds. I get it." He smoked and sighed. "I ain't knockin' it, Iz, believe me. But we gotta get the word out there too. Whole neighborhood, hell, all the surrounding ones too, gotta know this girl missing. And even then ..." He looked away. "Even then."

He stood, flicked his cigarette at the precinct, and headed down the block in a mean long-strided saunter. "You gotta keep hittin' up that little social e-network you on, Iz."

"Already on it!" Izzie jogged to keep pace alongside him and took out her phone. She pulled up the Hoozit app and started broadcasting in one smooth motion.

"Let the people know," Neville said. "We gotta find this girl and we gotta find her now, you feel me? Gotta tell folks to hit the streets, talk to each other, exchange information. All these social networks can save lives, and I don't just mean them little e-electronic ones y'all love so much,

although those help too. Feel me?” He looked down at Izzy and jumped back. “Whoa, babygirl, I didn’t realize you was filmin’! Damn. I woulda cleaned up some.”

Izzy flipped the camera on herself. “Y’all heard that? Lani Cortez missing. Family ain’t seen her since *noon* yesterday. Noon! If you on my feed, you already seen what PD plan on doing, aka not a damn thing, aka business as usual, which means we gotta hit the streets and make moves, like Uncle Neville said. Aight? Imma post a pic in a moment. Spread it *everywhere*, y’all.” She stopped recording and closed out the app, then hurried after Neville.

“Anyway,” he went on, “it’s just like it was when I was a youngen. Ain’t nothin’ changed ’cept the tools at our disposal and theirs. But if the police won’t do they job, we gotta do it for ’em. ’Cept hopefully without the killing people part. I *hate* killing people.”

Izzy had no idea if he was kidding or not. He flashed a wily grin at her that did nothing to clear up the situation.

“So, yeah, search teams, Internets, all that. And we gotta —”

Izzy stopped short. “Poster!”

“That’s right.”

“Which means ...”

Neville strode across the street to where his Cadillac was double-parked. “Imma drop you off. Gotta take care of some shit on my end. Hop in.”

## FIVE

“*Sulaaa*,” Akira Ibrahim’s voice wailed into the darkness. “*My song slips out for Sula*.” A vicious splatter of synth and drone blasts deluged the next set of lyrics, but it didn’t matter. No one ever really knew what he was singing and no one cared. That trembling falsetto and those fierce beats said all that needed to be said.

Tee twirled, one foot in the air. The seven-day candles she’d bought at the bodega spun into a blur around her. She felt her breasts bounce against her chest, the cool basement air on her naked back.

“*Ayyyyy, don’t even soooaaaeheehhh ... aneeeemore, my love ... my love my love my love*.” Tee leapt through the dim dank air, a kind of busted grand jeté, landed with arms outstretched above her head, twirled again. “*Aneeeemore, my love, nevermore*.”

No ghost girl. Well, no, that wasn’t totally true. Tee could still feel her. She was there. That much Tee knew, as truly as she knew the ghost girl wanted to stay a secret. That calm heaviness hung in the air, a presence: unmistakable. But she stubbornly refused to *show* herself. Or maybe she couldn’t.

“Help who?” Tee had said over and over. “Help who?” It became a chant, a dirge, each word bereft of meaning. But the ghost girl had just stared, mouth slightly open.

Tee had opened the chest again; she’d dug through the clothes, costumes mostly, on the off chance that one would somehow inspire the

ghost girl to speak again. She'd tried to 'shape her into the Linotype, into loose line drawings, into the damn printing press.

Nothing.

And then the ghost girl had faded, eyes widening slightly as she went. And Tee had gasped, her mouth repeating "help who help who help who" without permission or pause.

The ghost girl was gone.

And — a tingling certainty that the girl somehow remained there, invisible, notwithstanding — Tee had never felt so alone in her life.

"... who help who help who help who help ..."

The phone was where Tee would usually turn when loneliness tried to edge its way in. She'd text with the crew or Izzy or scroll through Hoozit. But she'd turned it to airplane mode hours ago and had no plans of changing that, because why? To see that Izzy hadn't texted back still, to read her mom's caustic response to her lie about where she'd be tonight?

Nah.

Music, though ... music.

"... whohelpwhohelpwhohelpwho ..."

Music would break this barren feeling.

And so Akira Ibrahim's lilting sob filled the air, and at the first despairing piano chord, the ghost girl had emerged out of the darkness, as if the music itself had summoned her. She swayed gently, her Afropuffs juggling on either side of her head. Tee had crossed the room so fast she was out of breath, but the girl was already flickering back into nothingness when she got there.

"*Helpless ... helpless ...*" Ibrahim crooned over the stumbling piano notes as she vanished. "*Ain't seventeen ain't twenty-two ain't me ain't you ... helpless ...*"

That's when Tee started to dance. It was pure frustration at first: She'd just hurled her body away. But it had become something more as she moved, something with grace. Her clenched fists shook on either side of her face as she bore down, falling to her knees, and the synths exploded into a

thrashing cascade. The music moved inside her, erupted from her crown and filled the dark room.

*“I am made of glass!”* Ibrahim yelled, wrathful. *“Glass is my nooo-ahhhh-rrayyyy ...”*

Tee unleashed herself, let her body propel forward without thought or self-consciousness. Arms raised, then pulled tight; her whole body a fist, then wide open, breathless.

She *never* moved like this. She barely kicked more than a two-step when music came on, usually just bopped her head on beat and let Izzy do all the fireworks.

This was another thing. This was freedom.

*“And everyone knows ayyyyyyy am ma-a-aaade made of gla-aaaaaaaaa ... everyone knows everyone knows, darling mine.”*

Ghost Girl flickered in and out and then vanished completely when the song ended. In the silence between songs, Tee retrieved the bodega candles; she lit them as the first strains of “Elemental Loss” shrieked out, was dancing again by the chorus.

She didn’t remember taking her clothes off, had no idea when her lips had finally stopped repeating “Help who” into infinity. All she knew was that she felt so alive and so alone and the ghost girl was gone and somehow still there, everywhere, she filled the room, and something, something needed to happen.

The door creaked open and Tee let out a scream and stumbled backward. A figure poked its head in and then Izzy’s voice said, “Tee-babe?”

Tee glanced at the corner — no ghost girl. Then she looked down and realized she was covering her breasts. But it was Izzy, but who was Izzy to her now? She took a step away from the door, shaking her head. “Iz ... what the hell?”

“Literally that’s my question at this moment, Tee. I’m not the one dancing naked in a candlelit church basement to sad boy tech-emo.”

Tee looked at her phone. The music had faded to the background of her mind as soon as the door opened, the spell broken. “Iz ... babe ... I ...”

Izzy’s eyes narrowed; she was realizing something. Tee knew that face, knew that whatever Izzy was about to say would be upsettingly true, cut through all the other bullshit and get right to the heart of everything. That was Izzy.

But she didn’t say anything. She squinted at Tee for another couple seconds, then her face softened. She came down the stairs and crossed the room. Without knowing why, Tee took a step back. “Iz ... I ...”

Izzy lunged, catching Tee in an unflinching embrace. She pulled her close and then squeezed. Tee gasped, her whole body a shaft of steel, and then she felt herself go liquid in Izzy’s arms. She sighed twice and burst into tears.

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“Must be something in the air tonight,” Izzy muttered as Tee’s sobs slowed. “And to think, I’m the one on my period.” They’d slid down the side of a table and now Izzy sat with her back against one of the legs and Tee lay with her head in Izzy’s lap.

“Mine’s on the way,” Tee blubbered. “And what other half-naked bitches crying into your pants, Iz?”

“Don’t act like you care,” Izzy snorted.

Tee sat up. She wiped her eyes and finally looked at her girlfriend for what felt like the first time in years. She took in Izzy’s arms — slender and a little too long for her short body — her music-note tats, and the way her braids rested on one shoulder. Her face, usually so defiant, now seemed wide open, lost. Izzy at a loss for words was the saddest thing Tee could think of. She was just a girl, really, but everything seemed to have gotten so real so quick; who could even *be* a girl anymore, with everything going on? Izzy’s eyebrows were raised, her nostrils flared, her mouth squeezed tight — the wholeness of her caught in some nowhere land between all that strength and all that pain.

“I ... I’m sorry,” Tee said, knowing it wasn’t enough. Izzy had come for her. Who knew why she’d shown up just now, but it didn’t matter, not really. She’d shown up in Tee’s darkest, weirdest hour, and instead of judging her or cursing her out, which she had all rights to do, she’d just swept her up in her arms and let her sob and sob and sob.

Izzy on the mic; Izzy lost in her poems; Izzy cursing out her geometry homework earnestly while everyone else laughed; Izzy naked in her arms, gasping for air: a whole other Izzy that no one else saw, Tee’s secret Izzy, the Izzy that was a flower, not a wall, an impossible riddle, delicious verse.

Izzy cocked her head at Tee.

“I’m sorry,” Tee said. She reached up to the table, found her T-shirt, pulled it on over her head. “I been ... I been lost, Iz. It’s been me, being lost. That’s all.”

“*Ain’t seventeen ain’t twenty-two ...*” Ibrahim’s voice was a faraway siren in the dim room. The album must’ve started over. “*Helpless ... helpless.*”

Izzy scrunched up her face, trying to steel it, Tee figured. It wouldn’t work. “You ... you’ve been gone, Tee. We haven’t ...” She shook her head, and then she looked at Tee full-on. “I guess I forgive you.”

Tee sighed a laugh. “Don’t sound so sure of yourself.”

Izzy smirked. “Don’t push ya luck. And anyway, I’m sorry too. I’ve been kinda ... well, hurt. And selfish maybe.” She shook her head, then leaned in for a kiss.

Tee took Izzy’s face in her hands and their lips met. After a few moments, she smiled against her girlfriend’s face. “Now who these hoes you got crying to ya?”

“Oh man.” Izzy pulled away, sitting up. Tee missed the taste of her immediately. “I got a lot to catch you up on since you decided to Gollum up in ya little cave.”

“I mean ...”

“Freak. Anyway, Lani Cortez missin’.”

“I *knew it!*” Tee yelled. “I knew something was off when I heard she didn’t show at the game last night and —”

“Congrats, Sherlock. Meanwhile, the whole neighborhood is out lookin’ for her, except the cops, of course, and we hit up the precinct with her fam and Uncle Neville and then the cops did their cop thing, aka nothing.”

“So who was crying?”

“No one was crying, it’s just Uncle Neville ... After we hit up the precinct and they did their stupid little dance, he looked ... I never seen him like that, Tee.”

“Like what?”

“Like someone had siphoned eight years of his life away. For a second he was really lookin’ like he might burst into tears.”

“Gangsta-ass unmesswithable Uncle Neville the bossdawg of the universe? *That* Uncle Neville? Cry?”

“Do we know any other Uncle Nevilles?”

Izzy’s face lit up with a faint blue glow. Tee’s eyes got wide. She turned. The ghost girl hovered right behind her, her soft blue burn illuminating the cracks and imperfections of the basement ceiling.

“What is it, babe?” Izzy said.

Tee felt her heart fall a little. The secret, once a gift, now felt like a burden. Too much was at stake and she didn’t know what to do anymore. The ghost girl’s mouth hung open in a silent scream now, her arms stretched wide in a forever reach.

Tee shuddered, turned back to Izzy. “Nothin’. This basement gives me the creeps sometimes, is all.”

“Well, yeah, think about what happened down here.”

“I have been, believe me.”

“Anyway!” Izzy stood, brushed herself off, and extended a hand to Tee. “We got folks combing the neighborhood, but you know ... what that really gonna do?”

Tee grabbed her hand and heaved herself up. “True.” She took in Izzy’s face, the cool fire from the ghost girl illuminating that sharp jawline and



drawing bright contours around her tightly wound braids. Her brow furrowed in determination.

Izzy made her voice go all scratchy and dropped it a few registers. “Like Neville said: This ain’t Maine! We ain’t in the woods, and yeah, it makes people feel better to have something to do, searching, he right, but ...”

“The printing press!”

Izzy nodded. “Why I came. You know how to work it?”

The huge machine loomed in the darkness, its metal glinting in the ghostly glow. “Took a class last week at the center.” Tee narrowed her eyes at it. “Yeah, I got this.”

---

Two hours later, Tee had set the lettering on the Linotype machine. Izzy had emailed her the pic of Lani she’d posted on Hoozit, and they’d printed it out on the laser printer. Then Tee applied the picture to the center of the page beneath the *Bed-Stuy Searchlight* masthead and the ghost girl’s plea: HELP HER. Below that, a couple sentences laid out the basic facts, with an additional note to call the precinct and demand they take action.

Tee stood in front of the great metallic monstrosity and took a deep breath. “Babe! It’s ready to roll!”

“Hold on,” Izzy said into her phone. “Comin’!”

“I think it is anyway,” Tee muttered. Everything didn’t fit together quite like it had in the training. Tee wished Bennie wasn’t away at that stupid science camp — she was a whiz with this type of mess. The paper lay in the feed tray, great metal arms poised to swing; everything was set.

Izzy walked up next to Tee, still on the phone. “Yeah, tonight. Well, you’re just gonnna haveta ... yeah. Damn. Why is this complicated? A girl is *missing*, you pubic louse ... Okay, see you in an hour. Peace.” She pocketed the phone and shook her head. “*Men*. Anyway, we good?”

Tee nodded, let out another breath. “We good.”

She flicked the switch; the press hummed to life. The lever came down and with a groan, the whole process leapt into motion. *Shwoomp!* The first paper slid out of the tray and a metallic *fwiing!* rang out as the gears clicked into place and the ink pressers rolled forward over the plate with a rattling *badda-badda-badda-badda-THWORP!* Metal arms flung the paper against the flat plate with a *CHA-chunk!*, and then — *ping!* — slung it away, now printed, and slid it along into a netted holding tray. Then the whole thing started again with a *shwoomp!*

Izzy gasped admiringly. “Babe! You did it!” She snatched the first printed sheet out of the tray and held it up. Lani Cortez’s face stared back at them off the page, her triumphant smile and big cheeks, curly hair held back by a striped headband. You could see a few teammates milling around behind her and the train tracks over Atlantic Avenue beyond them.

Tee didn’t know Lani well, but the sight of her face, larger than life, detonated a wave of sorrow within her. “Damn. She really gone, huh.” Tee could see what Uncle Neville meant about doing something, anything, being an antidote for all that fear and sorrow. She’d been so caught up in the printing press, it hadn’t even occurred to her to feel anything.

*Badda-badda-badda-badda*, the machine churned on, *THWORP!* The stack of papers grew. Even the ghost girl had slipped out of Tee’s mind for maybe the first time since she’d first appeared. The blue glow had faded again; she was gone.

“You know,” Izzy said. “The beat is actually fire.”

“Huh?”

“Listen.”

*Shwoomp! Fwiing!* Izzy held an invisible mic up to her lips. “Uh ... uh ...” *Badda-badda-badda-badda-THWORP!* Her face morphed into that relaxed King Impervious gaze. “One two ...” *CHA-chunk! Ping!* “One two ...” *Shwoomp! Fwiing!* “Turn me up.”

“Impervious on the mic!” Tee yelled. “You gotta do the rap, babe.”

Izzy’s face came back, the King gone in an instant. “What rap?”

“The one I ... the one I missed.”

A whole cycle of *badda-baddas* and *shwoomps* passed. Tee wondered if she'd crossed a line. "Too soon?"

*THWORP! CHA-chunk!*

Izzy lifted the invisible mic. *Ping! Shwoomp!*

"I treat this / like Imma beat this," she rapped, a sly smile growing on her face. "You just hors d'oeuvres / I'm the main meat, sis."

"Ohh!" Tee yelled. "The main ... meat ... sis. I can't with you."

The printing press rolled on. Izzy gave a play-by-play of the already legendary *Like a penis* line and the audience's reaction, and Tee fell out laughing as the holding tray grew heavy with sheet after sheet of posters with Lani's smiling face.

---

"Hey!" someone called from the door. "Whoa, you got it working!" Mina walked down the stairs and then just stood and gaped. "It's beautiful!"

Tee wiggled her eyebrows and crossed her arms over her chest.

"So I guess you heard," Mina said. "When I got to the Diamonds, folks were already organizing search teams. Tried calling, but ..."

"Yeah, my bad," Tee said. "I was ... caught up ..."

Mina shrugged. "It's cool. I joined in with the Baker's Dozen. We were swinging by this way, so I figured I'd check in."

"Perfect," Izzy said, coming out of the darkness and pocketing her phone. "You can take a stack to 'em and start posting." She passed a bunch of posters to Mina and picked up a stack for herself.

"Where you going?" Tee asked.

"Neville's outside with the Caddy. We gonna run around town handing these out to the search teams and running interference for 'em if the cops come around."

"Oh." Even Mina must've heard the disappointment in Tee's voice. She smiled awkwardly and peaced out quick, posters in hand.

"What is it?" Izzy asked.

“Nothin’,” Tee said. “I just ... nah, of course. Sorry. You gotta do that. I’m fine. I’ll be fine.” The basement felt very empty and unendingly dark.

Izzy squinted at her. “You sure?”

Tee forced herself to rally. “Girl, I been here alone all damn day. I’m fine! Anyway, gotta get some more of these posters printed. Go! Sheesh!”

“Aight, babe.” Izzy didn’t look convinced, but she leaned in for a kiss anyway, then grabbed a few more posters and was out.

Tee took a deep breath and faced the darkness.

## SIX

Izzy reached an arm across the front seat and craned her neck around to look at Sierra. “Any luck?”

Voices warbled back and forth quietly on Neville’s police scanner; otherwise, the night was quiet. Sierra opened one eye. “I’d have a lot more chance having luck if folks didn’t keep interrupting me to ask if I’m having any luck.”

Izzy turned around. “Fine. Sheesh.” They’d pulled up at the meeting spot about fifteen minutes earlier, and Sierra had gone into one of her transcendental-whatever states where she could see through the spirits’ eyes. Which was all well and good, but Neville was off smoking and Izzy was bored and anxious. She pulled out her phone to check Hoozit just as Neville poked his head in the driver’s side window.

“They comin’,” he said.

“Finally!” Izzy hopped out through her open window. Farther up Broadway, a half-dozen figures approached. The nasal drone of tiny revving engines got louder, and then Izzy could make out Trey and some of his boys riding itty-bitsy motorcycles. The whole crew hopped the curb and squealed to a melodramatic halt in front of Neville and Izzy.

“That was a lot,” Izzy said. “You really feel okay being an almost grown-ass man and riding around town on that thing?”

Trey shrugged. “We here, ain’t we? You gonna re us up or you gonna roast us?”

Izzy shrugged. “I mean, both, to be honest.”

Neville chuckled, then walked around to the trunk and pulled out a tall stack of posters. “Here you go. Be careful out there. You got tape?”

Trey nodded, shoving some posters in his shoulder bag and handing the rest off to his crew. “Yeah, Corey works at a hardware store and he got a key, so ... yeah.”

“Y’all good?” Izzy asked.

Trey shook his head. “Nah, we worried. But we gonna find her. And Iz — thanks for this.”

She waved him off. “No thing, man. Tee did all the work, we just handing ’em off.”

“Sierra with y’all?” Trey asked.

“She sleepin’,” Neville said with a glint of steel in his voice.

Trey gulped. “Gotya. No problem.”

“Peace,” Izzy called as the boys took off into the night. “Where we headin’ next?”

Neville checked his pocket watch. “It’s damn near four a.m., kiddo. Lemme drop y’all off and catch some shut-eye myself.”

Sierra was just blinking back to the land of the living when Izzy and Neville got in the front seat. She caught Izzy’s gaze in the rearview and shook her head. Izzy sighed. They pulled off toward Bed-Stuy.

---

Twenty minutes later, they’d dropped off Sierra and were flying up Throop, past twenty-four-hour fried-chicken spots and shuttered bodegas and nail salons. It was a warm night, but the breeze rushed in through Izzy’s open window, sent her braids dancing behind her head, and made her smile in spite of everything going on.

At least, it had been. The Caddy had started to slow a block ago, and now was barely crawling along. Up ahead, all the traffic lights shone bright green against the night sky.

“What’s happening?” Izzy asked. “We low on gas?”

Neville didn't say anything. The car kept slowing, then finally came to a stop in front of a housing project.

"Neville, what is it?"

He just stared ahead, his jaw trembling ever so slightly.

Izzy nodded. He would answer when he was ready, or he wouldn't. But pestering wasn't going to help. She settled into her seat. Neville cut the engine; a symphony of crickets filled the air. Not far away, some cats were either fighting or boning, letting out unholy shrieks in the night.

Neville lit a Conejo, exhaled heavily. "Corinna Dutch."

"Who?"

"My niece."

A delivery truck rattled past, then a skinny, bare-chested old man on a bicycle.

"She was your age" — he glanced at Izzy — "edge of seventeen. And then ..." Neville swallowed hard. "Halloween, eleven years ago. Her birthday. She just ..." He threw his hands up, dropped them in his lap. "She never came back."

Izzy let a moment pass. "Did you —"

"*Everywhere.*" His voice held whole continents of misery.

"And the cops?"

Neville pulled his lips in, his hands in prayer position against his chin. "That was the same week Jennifer Lorraine went missing."

"The white girl from that reality show? I heard about that."

"The reality show came *after* she went missing," Neville said. "And by 'went missing,' I mean 'ran off with a guy she met online and threw away her cell phone.'"

"Papers covered it for weeks, huh?"

"Front page, girl. You already know. Not a peep about Corinna."

"Damn."

"And the cops said the same shit they did just tonight ... *Maybe she ran off with a boy.*"

"I'm surprised you ain't the one that had to be held back earlier."

“Oh, I was,” Neville said. “It just all happened inside.” He took a drag. “Out of sight.”

“Gangsta,” Izzy whispered, more to herself than Neville, but he nodded slightly in acknowledgment.

“And they never ...”

“You know the one paper that covered my niece’s disappearance, Isake? I’ll give you one guess.”

“Manny and them.”

“You goddamn right. Day in and day out, the *Bed-Stuy Searchlight* ran updates, her picture, everything. Manny was out there every day, working the story.”

Izzy shook her head. “Wow.”

“And no ... they never found who did it. They found ... they found her body, though.” He put his face in his hands and shook silently. “In the Hudson. Not in the city, though, somewhere upstate.”

Izzy scooted closer in the seat, then she put her arm around Neville’s heaving shoulders and rested her head against him.



# SEVEN

“Hello?” Tee felt stupid yelling into the empty basement, but the darkness and silence hung like infinite curtains over the place, chilling her somewhere deep within, and speaking was the only way she knew to break through it.

No one answered, but the ghost girl’s hazy blue glow seemed to taint the dark. Or maybe that was Tee’s mind playing tricks on her, the fading afternoon light still burning across her retinas.

She walked down the stairs, holding her hands out for the light chain. For a heart-plummeting moment, she couldn’t find it. All the holy terrors of her nightmares crouched in the shadows: who or whatever had snatched Lani, those things that had come at them in the Tower last month ... then her fingers glazed the frayed string at the end of the chain and she pulled hard on it. The overheads flickered on; the place was empty.

She’d been there till the late-late the night before, first printing as many posters as she could, and then, when the ghost girl had finally reappeared, trying her damndest to get some more information out of her. But the ghost girl hadn’t been able to give much. Tee did manage to ‘shape her into the Linotype again, but then nothing had happened, and the nothing extended on and on. When Tee started nodding off, she shook her head and shut everything down for the night.

Now, walking toward the Linotype, she saw that brand-new slugs sat in the chamber. She blinked and ran to it.

WHEREISFT

For a few seconds, all Tee could hear was her own racing heartbeat.

“Eff ... tee,” she said out loud, and her voice, which just a few moments earlier had been a relief, suddenly unnerved her. She dropped her shoulder bag, took off her cap, and walked along the far wall of the basement, running her hands along the cool concrete. “Fra-aaank ... Fred ... Fitz ...” She was weary of giving voice to the question itself. The echo of yesterday still shuddered through her: *Help who* on infinite repeat. She had lost herself, almost completely, as if the ghost girl and her riddle were a cruel tide she’d been swept away in. Almost swept away. If it hadn’t been for Izzy ...

Tee checked her phone. It had been almost sunrise when they’d texted their good-night kisses to each other. Izzy had mentioned something about Neville and it being quite a night but said she’d explain everything to Tee in the morning. Of course they’d both slept the hell in, and Tee had texted when she woke, but Izzy was a world-champion grand master of sleeping in.

She was probably still asleep.

Tee shook away the worries; they were relentless today, but she had to focus.

She walked along the back wall, past Manny’s gallery of autographed celebrity photos, many of which included his own smiling face beside the actors and politicians.

“Freemason ... friend ... frère.”

The question lingered, heavy on her tongue, begging to be released.

“Who —” she started, then almost choked on the word. “Father!” She stopped. “Father Thomas?” She spun around, as if saying his name would somehow summon him, Candyman-style, into the basement with her.

“Father Thomas,” Tee whispered. “Shit ... no.”

The basement was still empty — no ghost girl, no Father Thomas. But she was in his house, technically, or his office anyway. Father Thomas had been the head priest at the church upstairs for as long as Tee could remember. There was no way he ... Was there? She tried to shuffle through

all her memories of him. There weren't many: Father Thomas at various block parties and neighborhood events, smiling, shaking hands, waving at folks. Father Thomas gardening; Father Thomas passing in the street with grocery bags. Izzy had once said Father Thomas woulda been hot if he had tits and everyone had groaned, and the running joke that no one could tell what race he was extended another couple measures. "You think when cops see him running," Izzy had asked, "they ask him what he is before they start shootin'?"

More groans. "He's white," Sierra had insisted. "He has a tan. Dassit!"

"But always?" Tee demanded. "He got a tanning salon behind the pulpit somewhere?"

Izzy shook her head. "He's white but he's one of those borderline-type whites with the permatans, like Sicilian or something."

"Whatever he is," Big Jerome said, "he's got Ken-doll hair, which means at the very least his mama white."

"Why do you just make things up and say them out loud?" Sierra demanded. And the conversation had wandered somewhere else from there, Tee couldn't remember where, but that was about it ...

She didn't have much to go on, but nothing about Father Thomas had ever jumped out at her as being even moderately creepy. He didn't have wandering eyes, never laid his hands on any of them in that aching, suggestive way that some adults did.

*Maybe, Tee thought, turning suddenly and crossing the room toward the table in the middle, it's not that he did it, it's that he's in trouble too.*

She powered up her laptop, checked her phone again idly — still nothing from Izzy — and then leaned over the desk and started an email.

*To: jnewman@kirzenfound.org*

*Cc: LRollins5@schools.nyc.gov*

*From: itsyagirlTee@gmail.com*

*Subject: Update*

*Hey Jessica —*

*Just wanted to drop a quick email and let you know we have had our first successful run of the printing press and it went really well. There was a situation in the neighborhood and we had to use the press to make posters instead of the first issue, but the reporters are hard at work on their articles for issue one and we should still be on schedule to release it in another day or two.*

*Do you happen to know where I might find Father Thomas or have a phone number I can reach him at? Had a question about the space is all, nothing serious.*

*Thank you!*

*T*

She hit SEND and then held her hands up. Her fingers were trembling ever so slightly. “Shit,” Tee whispered, and then the door swung open and she jumped back, heart hammering.

“Tee-babe!” Izzy yelled, barreling down the stairs.

Tee’s whole body went loose for a second as she exhaled all the tension she hadn’t realized she’d been holding. “Holy crap, Iz.” She leaned on the table. “You gotta learn to knock or something. You scared the ever-loving shit outta me.”

“Babe —” Izzy was across the room in seconds.

Tee grabbed her and pulled her close. “And I need you to text me the second you wake up. I don’t care if it’s clingy. Right now everything is too ... everything is too everything for me to worry about you not responding to my texts on top’a all this other stuff.”

Izzy smelled good: a little musty, with the hint of one of those body oils she got at the candle store on Bedford. She smelled like home.

“Babe, babe, babe,” Izzy said, kissing Tee and then standing back. “I feel you, but listen! I got stuff!”

“Me too!” Tee said, then it dawned on her how complicated her stuff would be to explain. “Er — you first.”

“Corinna Dutch!” Izzy yelled. Then her eyes went wide and her whole face lit up with a flash of blue.

Tee spun around.

“Who ... is!” Izzy sputtered.

The ghost girl hung in the air above them, mouth open, arms out again, brighter now than she’d ever been.

Tee shook her head as Izzy stepped up next to her. “I don’t ... know ... but ... that name you just said ...”

“Corinna Dutch,” Izzy whispered.

The ghost girl’s eyes opened and closed, very slowly, very sadly.

“Who’s that?” Tee said.

“Neville’s niece. She went missing on Halloween eleven years ago and they ... She was killed. They found her body, but never the guy who did it, and ... Wait, why aren’t you surprised that a spirit just appeared outta nowhere?”

Tee shuffled her feet.

“This ain’t the first time she appeared, huh?”

“I — I didn’t know how to tell you, Iz. It’s hard to explain. Like ... she ... somehow, I wasn’t supposed to say anything. I just knew that to be true and I can’t explain why, but it was.”

“This why you was damn near out ya mind yesterday when I found you?”

Tee gnawed on her upper lip and nodded.

“Shit, babe. I’m ... you know you can tell me anything ...”

“I know, I know. I just ... not this, somehow. I’m ... I’m sorry.”

“Who’s FT?”

She looked up. Izzy was staring at the slugs in the Linotype.

“*WHEREISFT?* Did she type that?”

The ghost girl swung forward with a whoosh and then spun across the room, hanging over the massive file cabinets stacked by the far wall.

“Yeah,” Tee said. “I think FT is ...”

Izzy’s wide eyes met Tee’s. “Father Thomas?”

“Only thing I can figure, and ...”

“Tee, Father Thomas the *priest*?”

“I think so. I just don’t know if it means *where is he* like *he did it* or *where is he* like he’s in trouble too somehow. Ya know?”

Izzy shook her head. “I have no idea what I know, to be honest. But we gotta ... what if ...”

“I know!” Tee said. “I know.”

“You think she’s tryna ...” Izzy took a few steps toward the file cabinets. “They got all the old *Searchlights* in there? Neville said Manny was the only one to cover Corinna’s disappearance.”

“Yeah, organized by year. You think there’s a ...” Tee fast-walked past Izzy, scanning the tiny labels on each drawer. “Here!” The cabinet opened with a cranky squeal. Izzy had said the girl disappeared on Halloween. Tee’s fingers trembled as she leafed through the dates to November. She pulled out the file and handed it to Izzy. They crossed back to the table and spread the pages out.

“Wow.” Tee’s voice was barely a whisper. The ghost girl’s — no, Corinna’s blue glow threw Tee’s and Izzy’s shadows across the papers as she floated up behind them. Her face smiled off almost every page. Here was Corinna’s precious short life story, there the details of when, where, and what she was wearing when she was last seen (leaving her house to go trick-or-treating; dressed, as she was now, as a cat in a slinky black top, with whiskers painted on her cheeks and two gray ears poking out of her hair). Here was her obituary (body discovered, as Neville had said, decomposing in a river somewhere upstate), her funeral, the protests at the precinct over their inaction, the endless search for her killer, slowly fading out, day by day ...

“Do you remember all this?” Izzy whispered.

Tee shook her head. “We were, what? Six? I guess they didn’t want to freak us out. It all happened right here.”

“Anything about Father Thomas?”

Tee scanned the articles about Corinna; Neville was in there a couple times, giving statements about the search efforts, but the priest’s name was nowhere to be found. “Maybe it’s somewhere else ...” She flipped some of the pages over, glancing at the other articles. Behind her, Corinna stirred and flickered, her presence a cool zephyr at the back of Tee’s neck.

“New bakery opens on Marcy ... Construction on the Diamonds ... Neighbors gather to discuss plans for a new library branch ... Here!” She blinked at the page.

*Father Thomas Greg, recently returned from a monthlong tour through the hurricane-ravaged Caribbean, states he’s excited about the possibility of a new library in the area. “These kids need more books,” Father Greg said. “Heck, we all do!”*

“What’s the date?” Izzy asked.

“December second, so ...”

“Universal Ken got gone right when Corinna disappeared.”

“Yeah, but ...” Tee furrowed her brow. “You think he ... ?”

They looked around. The basement’s silence suddenly seemed very heavy. Then they looked up. “You think he up there?” Izzy whispered.

Tee rubbed her eyes. “I can’t believe this is where we’re at. Ain’t no way he ...”

Izzy stared at her.

“I mean ...”

“Either way,” Izzy said, “Corinna wants to know where he is. So let’s at least see if he *here*. Ya know? I mean, have you even *seen* him over the past two days?”

“I saw him the day before yesterday. But he also said he don’t really come down here ever.”

“Which is kinda weird,” Izzy growled through clenched teeth.  
“Dontchya think?”

“I mean, he said it ... creeped him ... out.”

They both turned to Corinna. She stared back at them, her face wide open and inscrutable as ever.

---

A halo of dyed purple hair surrounded Ms. Tanner’s sagging face. She might’ve been eighty, might’ve been sixty. What was clear, abundantly so, was her passion for perfume and all manner of makeup and jewelry. She leaned over her desk, smile first, and Tee and Izzy took a step back.

“Father Thomas, you say?”

“Seen him?” Tee asked.

Ms. Tanner retreated back to her side of the desk and adjusted her librarian glasses. “Mmmmm, not since, let me see, yesterday? Yesterday was Thursday?”

“Today is Thursday,” Izzy said. Tee put her hand on Izzy’s and squeezed.

“Well,” Ms. Tanner huffed, giving Izzy a thorough up-and-down for the first time. “Every day is the Lord’s day, am I right?”

“Wouldn’t know,” Izzy said. “I took myself off the email list.”

Ms. Tanner squinted sharply behind her glasses. “Perhaps *I* can help you with something instead?”

“No,” Tee said. “We’re really looking for Father Thomas. It’s a, uh ... spiritual question.”

Ms. Tanner lit up. “Oh, I’m actually very —”

“It *has* to be Father Thomas,” Tee said. “Sorry. Does he have, like, a pager or something?”

“He sometimes doesn’t come in till the wee — oh!” Ms. Tanner interrupted herself with a joyful squeal, her eyes fixed on the bulletin board next to Izzy. “Well, there’s your answer!”



“What?” Tee and Izzy said, scanning the bake-sale and crochet-class announcements.

“Right there, sillies!” Ms. Tanner pointed at a small metal hook sticking out of the cork. A sticker over it announced SARAGASSET in block letters.

“What’s Saragasset?” Tee asked.

“The church’s retreat center, of course. Father Thomas must’ve headed out there for some peace and quiet. The air is so fresh there, you know —”

“Out where?” Izzy said, her hand squeezing Tee’s back.

“The retreat house, of course.”

“Where. Is. The. Retreat. House —”

“Well, upstate, obviously. You two have never been to Saragasset before? It’s so lovely this time of year — hey! Girls?”

---

“I *knew* it!” Izzy yelled as they burst back into the basement. “I can’t ... What do we ...”

Tee just shook her head. “We gotta ... I don’t ...”

For almost a minute, they both just stood there, taking apart and putting the pieces back together. Father Thomas had gone upstate without telling anyone — upstate, where they found Corinna’s body. He’d been away when she went missing, and now Lani had vanished and he was out of town again. Corinna spun a small sad circle in the far corner, her glow growing fierce and then simmering off in a slow pulse.

“Text Neville,” Tee said.

Still spinning, Corinna looked up.

“Already did,” Izzy said. “He on the way. Didn’t explain, just said to roll up ASAP.”

Tee nodded, then pulled out her own phone, which had been on silent all along. She pulled up the one email waiting for her. It was from Jessica.

*To: itsyagirlTee@gmail.com*

*Cc: LRollins5@schools.nyc.gov*

*From: jnewman@kirzenfound.org*

*Subject: RE: Update*

*Dear Trejean,*

*Thank you for the update, and I'm glad to hear things are going well. However, I'm afraid that the grant stipulates that —*

She skipped ahead.

*So unfortunately, we're going to have to have a conversation about how to move forward with this project, which we are committed to seeing through to its —*

She skipped to the end.

*As for Father Thomas, he's informed us that he's taken an unexpected trip out of the country for some missionary work this week, but hopes to be back next week, depending on how things go.*

*Look forward to speaking with you soon,*

*Jessica Newman*

*The Kirzen Foundation*

Tee blinked at the phone. Her mouth moved up and down but nothing came out. "Son of a —"

"What it is?" Neville said, barging in on long strides.

Corinna burst into a flurry of movement, sending wild flashes of blue across the walls. In seconds, she'd swept across the basement and stopped a few inches from Neville.

“Well?” Neville said, looking back and forth between Tee and Izzy’s gawking faces.

Corinna threw herself forward, wrapping ghostly arms around Neville’s neck and nuzzling into his shoulder. Her shining, translucent body shivered with silent sobs.

“What are you guys staring at?” Neville demanded.

“Long story,” Tee said. “We gotta talk on the way. You up for a drive?”

## EIGHT

A light rain danced across the windshield as they burned out of the city in Neville's Cadillac Seville. For a long time, he didn't say anything, didn't even put the wipers on: Jaw clenched, hands tight on the wheel, he just drove. They'd laid out everything as clearly as they could without mentioning Corinna, who lay draped around Neville's back like a sweater.

Night fell. The rain tapered off. They sat in traffic at a toll booth for what seemed like forever.

The woods around them became black shadows against the darkening sky.

Izzy realized she'd never been in Neville's car without music playing before. It made her antsy. "What you thinkin', man? C'mon."

Neville shook his head as if snapping out of a long sleep. He frowned. "I think it's very circumstantial."

Izzy met Tee's eyes in the rearview, then looked away. She took a deep breath, forcing herself not to explode. "But?"

"But still worth checking out." He handed Izzy his phone. "Find the contact marked *R*, text 'em the address we're heading to."

"Backup?" Izzy pulled the glossy Saragasset brochure they'd taken from the front office out of her pocket and clicked on the inside light.

"Something like that," Neville muttered.

"Old Hill Road ... not even a damn number; that's how remote this place is. Old Hill Road." She shook her head, tapped it in, hit SEND. "That's

it?” She handed the phone back to Neville. “No *Meet me there*, no explanation, no nothin’?”

Neville finally let a slight smile edge across his face. “That’s what friends are for.”



An hour and a half later, Neville pulled onto an unpaved road and killed the headlights.

Izzy took a deep breath of fresh country air and gazed into the darkness. “This is it, huh?”

Neville nodded.

Izzy peered back at Tee. “You good?”

Tee nodded once, game face on. Corinna stirred from Neville’s shoulder, gazing around.

Up ahead, a few one-story cabins loomed in a long field. Squares of light marked the closest one to them; the rest were dark. A cheerful sign welcomed them to the Saragasset Retreat Center, adding PRAISE THE LORD! in bubble letters.

“Alright, listen,” Neville said, killing the engine and pocketing the keys. “Here’s the deal —”

“Hol’ up,” Izzy said. “Let’s not do this whole ‘You wait in the car’ thing, okay? It’s not gonna happ —”

Neville let out a soft chuckle. “Easy, Iz, I wasn’t gonna say that.”

“Oh.”

“Uncle Neville don’t like splittin’ up the team. ’Specially when the team is only three and two of ’em is minors. And look, backup is still a little ways out.”

“The mysterious Mr. R,” Izzy said.

Neville’s mischievous smile made an appearance, then vanished. “And while the evidence we got is dubious at best, we still need to have a little strategy session. You got any bars?”

Tee and Izzy took out their phones, shook their heads.

“Figured. I do, but fat lotta good it’s gonna do me if I can’t reach either of you. We basically just gonna roll up on the spot and see what’s what, real nice and genial-like. But if anything go sour and we get split up or something, gotta yell, I guess. If you need to run, run to the car. If the car outta the question, head right out the driveway. We passed a rinky-dink little bar about a quarter mile back. Shit gets chaotic, that’s the beacon. Got it?”

Tee and Izzy nodded. Izzy tried not to imagine just how chaotic shit could get, failed miserably.

“And remember,” Neville said, “much as everything looks wild suspicious, we functioning on the presumption of innocence, but ready for anything. If you happen to make it back to the car and I ain’t here, there’s a baseball bat on the floor in the back.”

Tee fumbled around till she found it. “Imma name it Hot Sauce 2.0.”

“That’ll work.” He opened the car door. “Leave the heavy-duty stuff in the trunk till I’ve had a chance to train you on it. Alright? Let’s do this.”

The air was fresh and the sky impossibly dark with a billion stars.

Corinna detached from Neville, gave a longing look back at him, and then fluttered off into the darkness. Tee took a step after her, opened her mouth to yell, and then caught herself. Neville was rummaging with something in the front seat and hadn’t noticed.

“Iz, I gotta go after her,” Tee said.

Izzy shook her head, already knowing she wouldn’t be able to stop Tee. “Babe ...”

“I ... she’s ... I can feel it like she’s pulling me. She’s going to Lani. I know she is.”

Izzy’s mind swirled with images of hands reaching out of the darkness, grabbing Tee. “But —”

Corinna hung like a luminous blue Christmas tree out in the field beyond the first cabin. She had stopped and turned back to them, her wide eyes set on Tee.

“Look,” Izzy said, “if you die, Imma kill you so damn hard.”

“But —”

“Shh. I don’t care. I will follow ya ass into Hell just so I can whup it. Clear?”

Tee nodded once. “That’s very damn romantic.”

“Shut up. And be careful.”

Tee nodded again, then turned and ran out into the field. Izzy let a tiny sigh escape. Maybe, somehow, Tee would be alright. And so would she. And then they’d look back on this day when they were old and shake their heads with sad smiles.

“You ready, night dreamers?” Neville said. “Wait, what ... *Tee!*” he whisper-yelled. He turned a frantic look to Izzy. “Where the hell is she going?”

Izzy cringed. “She’s ... she thinks she knows where Lani is?”

Neville stood staring after her for a solid ten seconds, his whole body tensed as if he might explode across the field after her. Finally, he shook his head, a severe frown creasing his face. “This some ghosty-ghost shit y’all be messing around with, ain’t it? You and my goddaughter and the crew.”

Izzy nodded.

“I don’t like splittin’ up,” Neville grumbled, walking up the gravelly path toward the cabin. “I don’t like it all.” At the door, he glanced at Izzy once before knocking. “Play along,” he muttered. “I’m sure you know how.”

The door swung open before Izzy had time to respond, and she had to quell the flush of terror that tried to break out across her face.

“Hello?” Father Thomas said. “Oh, Neville! Isake? What’s ... what’s going on?”

She had to give him this: Father Thomas didn’t *look* like a man who had just been caught in his secret hideaway after kidnapping a teenage girl. He wore a cardigan and khakis and had a mug of tea in one hand. His eyebrows rose with mild surprise, not holy terror or guilt.

“Hey, Father T,” Neville said. “So glad you’re here, man. I was heading out to drop Izzy here off at her summer program and we started running low

on gas. GPS wasn't showing any open service stations for miles, and I remembered the church has this retreat center out here, figured we could —"

"Of course," Father Thomas cooed. "Come in!"

"We're so sorry to trouble you," Neville said.

Father Thomas waved him off and flashed a wide smile at Izzy. "Not at all! Don't be silly."

*This must be the main rec house*, Izzy decided. The big room had folding chairs set up and a podium at the far end. Cheesy Jesus posters smiled out from the walls, and a hand-painted banner announced SARAGASSET in huge colorful letters. "Please make yourselves at home," Father Thomas said, leading them to a plush couch. "Do you want any crackers or juice? Perhaps a cup of tea?"

The urge to attack rose up in Izzy without warning. It must've been lurking, coiled up this whole time, while her mind caught up to the fact that they were there, at the camp, with this (probably) murderous creep. Now it reared up; how *dare* he offer them crackers and juice when Lani might be tied up somewhere, or dead? When Tee might be next? Her fists clenched at her sides and she turned to face the wall so she wouldn't leap across the room and throttle him.

"I'm good," Izzy mumbled.

"I'd love a tea, thanks," Neville said. "Or coffee if you have it."

"Just tea, I'm afraid." Father Thomas gave an apologetic shrug and padded over to the small kitchen area. "It's amazing you caught me," he called over his shoulder.

*Just wait*, Izzy thought.

"I'm not usually out here on the off-season. Just come up every now and then to clear my head, commune a bit with the Lord in close quarters, you know? It's mighty hard to get a moment of peace in the bustle of city life."



“I hear that,” Neville said. “Why do ya think when Izzy said she needed a ride upstate, I jumped at the opportunity?” He let out a pretty convincing chuckle, and Father Thomas joined him. Izzy wanted to puke. “Fresh air!” Neville said.

“It’s a beautiful thi —” Father Thomas shot a furtive stare at the far window, then squinted.

Izzy followed his gaze, but saw only black night and ghostly reflections in the glass. “What is — ?”

“Shh,” Father Thomas snapped.

In the distance, a dog barked and growled.

Father Thomas fixed Neville with a slow, appraising glare. “Seems someone else is on the property.”

“Oh?” Neville said, his eyes wide with concern. “Should we be worried?”

Father Thomas laughed, his mask of geniality fixed and set back in place. “Not at all, I’m sure. The dogs get excited about anything. Stay here, though; your tea will be ready in a few minutes. I’ll go check it out.”

He headed out the back exit; Izzy couldn’t decide if he was forcing himself to walk slowly or really didn’t see much reason to rush. Either way, there was a dog prowling around, and Tee was out there somewhere, probably terrified. “We gotta go,” she whispered when the door closed behind Father Thomas. “Gotta help Tee.”

“Help her *how*?” Neville said. “It doesn’t work that way. Stay cool, Iz. I know it’s hard, trust me. We don’t know if she needs helps yet. Keep an eye out that window.”

It took everything in Izzy not to bolt out the door and into the night, screaming her true love’s name.

“Be cool, Iz,” Neville whispered. “Be cool.”

## NINE

The crickets were loud as hell out here in the way-deep back-ass country end of New York. Or cicadas. Or zombie death mutant arachnids of hell. That's what Tee tried to concentrate on as she jogged along the tree line at the edge of the field, a few steps behind Corinna's glowing form. The ghost girl seemed to know where she was going, so Tee followed. And then Corinna straightened very suddenly and dashed off toward a long building at the far end of the compound.

A few seconds after Tee started after her, she heard the barking.

It came from all around her at first, like a thousand snarling hellhounds were emerging from the woods at once. The whole world became her breath and heartbeat, her pounding feet and the dark sky bouncing wildly as she closed in on the building behind Corinna. The howling dogs sounded like they were right behind her.

Corinna turned just as Tee reached the door. She looked out at the dark field with those big haunting eyes and then stepped backward, vanishing into the building. Tee threw open the door — imagining claws and teeth bearing down on her at any second — hurled herself inside, and slammed it behind her.

Now she stood with her back against the wall, panting. The scratching and whining of the hellhounds trailed off quickly. Tee gazed at a medium-sized chapel complete with red carpets, wooden pews, and a huge crucifix at the far end, looming over the whole room, and ... *Lani!*

Tee bolted down the center aisle to where Lani Cortez lay sleeping on a foldout table. She wore an elegant wedding gown, which draped over the sides of the table like some giant doily. “Lani,” Tee gasped, grabbing her shoulders. “Wake up, girl! What’s going on?”

Her body was warm — she couldn’t be dead, right?

Tee shook her again. “Lani! Can you hear me?” She gently pulled open Lani’s eyelids. Her light-brown irises glared back at Tee, the pupils just tiny faraway dots in the center. *She’s been drugged*, Tee thought, and then Corinna appeared in a flash, arms waving toward the door. Tee whirled around; the dogs started barking again, this time without the growl. Someone was coming — someone they were happy to see. She threw herself to the ground and commando-rolled under the nearest pew just as the door swung open.

“Down, boys, down!” a voice said. Father Thomas’s voice. Tee tried to catch her breath, but even lying still, it felt like it was running away from her. “Get! I said get! Good boys!” The door closed and footsteps padded down the carpet toward her.

Tee tossed up a breathless, silent prayer. She was in a chapel, after all, and she’d always loved her grandma’s church, even if she’d stopped going after Grann had passed. What better place to beg for divine intervention?

The footsteps stopped. Tee heard Father Thomas take a deep breath. He walked a little closer, paused again. She closed her eyes, braced for whatever came next.

It wasn’t what she expected: the quiet digitized blip-blips of a cell phone, then a distant ring.

“Krin? Hello?” Father Thomas’s voice shivered. After a pause, someone mumbled something on the other end.

“Listen ... there’s a problem ... I know, I know. Someone’s here. Some folks from the neighborhood. Nothing I can’t handle, no, I’m just letting you know ... What? That’s *not* the arrangement. No ... Listen to me ...” The voice on the other end got agitated. “I said I will handle it,” Father Thomas moaned. “You don’t need to! No! All this work and time and

patience, you can't just come and ... Fine, fine, fine. Look, Krin, I will have this handled by the time you arrive, so you might as well not ... Alright, fine, I guess we'll see when you get here."

The call ended with a beep and then Tee heard a soft thud — Father Thomas dropping to his knees, she figured — followed by an anguished growl.

Was he going to ... ? Tee tensed, imagining herself rolling out from under the bench and bum-rushing Father Thomas. She would be at a disadvantage in about twenty different ways. It wasn't like she could just burst onto her feet, smashed pews flying in slo-mo to either side of her like in some action movie. This was real life: She'd roll out and probably get stuck on the way, then clobbered as she tried to stand, and what good would that do? Still, he sounded desperate, and if he was gonna kill Lani now, Tee didn't have much choice.

She tensed again and was about to roll when Father Thomas stood and stormed back up the aisle. She heard a jingling sound, then the sharp roll of a key entering a lock, followed by a click. The door swung open and then slammed shut again. The dogs erupted into excited barks, and then Father Thomas's muffled voice said, "C'mon, boys, let's go," and the barking grew distant.

Tee let her breath come back to her. She rolled out from under the pew. Stood. Walked up the center aisle, her eyes glued to the big white door in front of her. She hadn't looked at it before, but there beneath the metal handle was a small brass circle. A lock. Tee knew what would happen when she reached the door, but she wrapped her hand around the cool metal very slowly and pushed down.

It didn't budge.

She was locked in.

Tee turned around, saw Corinna Dutch's glowing form hovering in a far corner of the room, dim in the neon chapel lights. They made eye contact, then both looked at Lani. Tee knew what she had to do. She didn't know what would happen after that, but right now, the next move was completely

clear. Tee started down the aisle just as Corinna burst forward in a flurry of light and motion. Tee raised one hand in the air as she ran and stretched the other toward Lani Cortez.

## T E N

“I think he went into that long building across the field,” Izzy said, cupping her hands on the glass and squinting out into the darkness. “And then someone came out, I think it was him. Neville?”

“Izzy, you gotta just ...”

“I ain’t gotta do nothin’, man. What I gotta do is go make sure Tee is okay.” She shook her head, fighting off tears.

“Look,” Neville said.

“No, you look. Look while I exit out this place.” She threw open the door and flung out into the night.

“Iz!” Neville yelled from behind her, but she paid him no mind. She had to make it to the long building, then she’d figure out what to do next. The figure who’d walked out of the door — it hadta be Father Thomas — had walked off to the right and disappeared into one of the other cabins. He’d probably be back, but not before she made it to that door. The night sky never looked this gigantic in Brooklyn; there was so much of it! All the trees seemed to shush in time with their own strange rhythm, and the millions of insects sang their night song.

She could just make out the details of the door — white and wooden with a cross mounted on the front — when Father Thomas’s voice rang out. “Stop!” She’d never heard the man raise his voice, let alone holler desperately across a field. He sounded terrified and furious at the same time. Izzy didn’t care how he felt; he was far enough away that she could make it to the door, she knew she could. “Stop, I said! Don’t — !”

The first thing Izzy thought of when she heard the metal *chuh-chuk* was Manny's printing press. That fire beat. The cool darkness of the basement. Tee there, smiling while Izzy rapped. Izzy realized she'd stopped running without meaning to, just an arm's length from the door. The moon glinted off the long steel cylinder in Father Thomas's hands; he was still about ten feet away, but Izzy knew exactly what it was, what the click had been.

Her mouth dropped open, both her hands raised. Father Thomas lifted the rifle, walking fast toward her. Everything seemed to move very slowly. His face was scrunched into a frown like he was about to cry, and Izzy wondered why he looked so sad, given that *he* was the one with the gun. Her insides felt like they were turning to goo, like she might collapse right there without even being shot, and become liquid and then nothing in the dark grass on this summer night so far away from home.

And then Neville yelled, "Hey!" and when Izzy turned there he was, strolling across the field, pistol drawn and pointed at Father Thomas. He looked eternally calm, like he was just out for a walk and happened to have his handgun with him.

Father Thomas turned, the rifle shaking against his face, aimed at Neville. "Don't take another step, Neville! I don't — I don't want to hurt anyone!"

"That's fantastic," Neville said pleasantly. "There's an easy way to make that happen."

Then something went *bang bang bang* from the other side of the door. Izzy yelled, "Tee?" and then hated herself for saying Tee's name in front of this maniac, but maybe it wouldn't matter anyway, because they were all probably about to die.

"Get away from the door!" Father Thomas screamed, but he kept his gun trained on Neville.

"Is that you, Tee?" Izzy whimpered.

*Bang! Bang! BANG!*

If she reached out, she could have the handle in her grasp. She could pull it. She could make it inside, find Tee, get far away from all this.

“Get away, I said!” Father Thomas yelled.

“Now, listen,” Neville said. “I want you to just —”

Izzy grabbed the handle and pulled it open with a yell. A figure stood in the doorway, but it wasn’t Tee. Father Thomas’s eyes went wide. Lani stepped out, her body stiff, shoulders hunched. She wore a fancy white dress with all kinds of lace and poofiness, and she wasn’t moving like Lani at all.

“How —” Father Thomas gasped, and then Lani coughed and shivered and collapsed forward onto her knees as a blue glow emerged from her.

Izzy blinked in the sudden spectral glare of Corinna Dutch. She hung in the dark sky, brighter now than ever before, her eyes creased to furious slits, hands reaching out toward Father Thomas.

Father Thomas let out a yell, then said, “Corin —”

The crack of Neville’s pistol exploded in the night — once, then again — and Father Thomas flew backward and landed in a heap.



# ELEVEN

Tee reached the doorway a second after the shots rang out. *Izzy* was all she could think. *Izzy Izzy Izzy please don't let it be Izzy*. She blinked out into the night. *Izzy Izzy Izzy* her mind insisted, even as Tee squinted in the blue glow. Corinna expanded and contracted in slow, pulsing waves over the field, brighter than ever before. Neville stared up at her, his gun hand lowered, the other reaching out; his mouth hung open.

*Izzy*, Tee's mind growled. *Where the —*

Lani lay sprawled just in front of Tee; she took a breath, her face oddly peaceful, as if she had just decided to take a nap right there in the grass. *Izzy* appeared from out of nowhere, crouching over Lani and shaking her.

*Izzy!* Tee's mind crowed, and then she heard herself say the name, felt her knees give out as she stumbled into her girlfriend's embrace. The tears seemed to have gotten knocked loose by her forward motion; they poured out of her, onto *Izzy's* shirt. *Izzy* was laughing, and Tee had no idea why but somehow it made perfect sense, because there she was sobbing and *Izzy* was laughing and both their bodies were heaving and both were undeniably true to the complete shitstorm that had just exploded around them.

"I love you," Tee said in a blubbery whisper. "I love you so deep."

"Shut up," *Izzy* laughed. "Your timing is shit."

When they finally let go of each other, Neville was still transfixed in Corinna's light. He was smiling, one hand reaching out into the bright blue haze. Then he closed his eyes and nodded, and Corinna swam through the night, away from Neville. She spun a small, slow circle, glancing

disdainfully at something crumpled in the grass — Father Thomas, Tee realized with a gasp — then stopped in front of her and Izzy. She smiled, and her smile was like a blessing, like a long-awaited breath of air. Tee and Izzy reached out their entwined hands and the spirit reached out one of hers.

Tee closed her eyes and gasped; she was back in the basement, but the world was a hazy blur.

And then she understood: Corinna's parting gift was her memory.

*At first, she had no name, no memory, no self. She was just a terrified spirit, alone and brand-new, her life and death frantic glimpses, muddled and blurry and terrifying.*

*She followed the trail of her own missing posters back to the place where they'd been made. She thought to make a home there, to recuperate, but then a living human had appeared — a shuddering memory, the flash of a knife, this man, now dressed in a priest's outfit, crying and laughing, crying and laughing.*

*She had shrieked with everything in her, and then hid in the nearest place she could find: an old trunk full of clothes. There, she had fallen away from the world entirely, lost herself in the gentle folds of fabric and let time slip away.*

*Until an aching had stirred in her. A certain, wordless knowing.*

*Whatever had happened to her, it was happening again.*

*Then the trunk had opened and she emerged, shattered by broken memories. Nameless, barely there at all, confused about everything except the absolute certainty that something was happening that she had to stop. Something that no one else knew about. A secret.*

*And then a beautiful girl slid into her favorite violet dress and marveled at herself in the mirror.*

Tee opened her eyes, and for another moment, they held Corinna's. She let that peaceful smile and glow take her over, overcome her.

Then Corinna nodded once and stretched both her arms out, floating backward into the night.

"You alright, Neville?" Tee called.

Neville nodded, blinked a few times, and then walked a few steps. He pinched his pant legs at the thigh and hitched them up, then squatted and reached a long arm down to Father Thomas's neck. After a moment, he shook his head, picked up a rifle that was lying beside the priest, and stood. "Let's get the hell outta here."

"Oh, shit," Tee said. "He made a phone ca —"

The growl of a diesel engine and screeching tires filled the night as stark headlights lit the field, throwing sharp shadows against the chapel wall.

"What the damn?" Izzy said. Neville had already sprinted over to them and was lifting Lani onto his shoulders, fireman-style.

"He called someone," Tee said. "Someone named Krin or something. While I was hiding out in the chapel. Sounded like they were gonna come get Lani."

The headlights got brighter as a Jeep came rumbling across the field toward them and then swerved to the side and squealed to a halt. Tee squinted through the brights; four guys with shaved heads hopped out. They wore combat boots and camo vests.

"Get behind me," Neville muttered, stepping forward. "Run if I say run; don't ask questions."

"No," Tee said. "We ain't running if you ain't running." She stepped up beside him and Izzy followed suit.

"Greetings," one of the men said. "Seems you have something of ours."

"I don't think so," Neville said. He had the rifle in one hand, the pistol in the other, and Lani slung over his shoulders in her wedding gown. Neither gun was raised, but Tee could feel his whole body tensed to spring into action.

On an insignia painted on the side door of the Jeep, a two-headed eagle rose from a sea of blood; in front of it was a shield with a star and three stripes, also dripping with blood. Two broadswords crossed in the background. Tee committed it to memory, then looked up and was startled

to find one of the men staring at her. And he wasn't a man, really; he was just a kid like her.

"This can go a couple different ways," the one who'd spoken before said. He was older, in his forties, and looked like he was trying really hard to appear calm. "None of which are good for you, my friend. So why don't you choose the path of least resistance, as they say, and just —"

Gunfire exploded in the night. Tee dropped, felt Izzy clatter to the ground beside her, prayed they were both okay. It wasn't just a shot or two: the steady *rat-tat-tat* of an automatic weapon pounded across the sky. Tee felt like she was going to throw up.

The guys in front of them were ducking and rolling around like bad extras in a shitty war movie. "Go! Go! Go!" one of them yelled as they stumbled into the Jeep, and another round of gunfire blazed through the night.

Tee glanced at Izzy, who was panting but otherwise looked okay. Neville still stood tall with Lani slumped over his shoulders and a gun in each hand, a slight smile on his face. He watched the Jeep barrel off through the field, and then turned toward the woods. A slender figure was walking toward them at an easy pace.

"Who — ?" Tee said.

Izzy made bunny ears with her fingers. "The mysterious Mr. R, am I right?"

"Ms. R," Neville corrected. He shot them a wink and then looked up. "Nice of you to make an appearance."

"Well, no one told you to go picking fights with skinheads in the ass end of New York State, Neville." The woman was in her fifties with short graying hair and a voice like an ashtray. She wore a brown pin-striped suit, the jacket hanging open to reveal a holstered pistol under her arm. She had what looked like a damn AK-47 in one hand, pointed at the ground.

Tee gaped. "You ... who ... how?"


She cocked her head at Tee and Izzy. "Who they?"

“They cool,” Neville said. “From the neighborhood. We gotta get this girl home.” He nodded at Lani. “You got this?”

“Who ... is ... she?” Izzy stammered, eyes wide with unabashed adoration.

“Yeah, I already called in a cleanup crew; we good.” She paused, caught Neville’s eye. “You good?”

“Yeah,” Neville said. “Imma be alright.”



Standing in the parking lot in her pajamas and glasses, her hair pointing in about eight different directions and one of Neville’s briefcases in her hands, Bennaldra Jackson looked like she couldn’t decide whether to be thrilled or annoyed. “What is this?”

“You left your briefcase back in Brooklyn,” Neville said, kissing her cheek and heading back to the Caddy.

Bennie squinted at him, looked down. “I have a briefcase? ... What?”

Tee waited her turn while Izzy ran up, gave Bennie a quick hug and a high five, then darted off.

“You guys, what the hell!” Bennie demanded.

“It’s a long story,” Tee said, squeezing Bennie with all her might. “But don’t ask. Seriously. I know that’s weird. Just let this one go.”

“Are you guys alright?”

Neville honked twice. “Let’s roll, kiddos!”

Tee kissed Bennie on each cheek. “Yeah,” she said, and meant it.



“The hell was all that about?” Izzy asked as they sped through the last few miles of dark upstate roadways toward the city. Lani snored peacefully in the backseat beside Tee.

“In case anyone asks,” Tee said.

Neville shot her a smug smile in the rearview. “Bingo.”

“Asks what?”

“Why we all were running around upstate the same night a priest disappeared without a trace.” Something about the way Neville said *without a trace* left little to the imagination, Tee thought. It wasn’t just that no one would ever find Father Thomas’s body; there would be no body to find.

“Cell tower triangulation!” Izzy said. “They could track our moves through our phones. Bananas!”

Neville nodded. “Signal out here is crap enough that they won’t get an accurate location anyway, but now y’all got a reason for having been here. Nobody gonna ask, but I like to play it safe.”

Izzy smacked the dashboard. “*That’s* why you insisted on going through the cash lane at all the tollbooths!”

“Now you’re gettin’ it.”

“I thought it was just cuz you old!”

“Now hold on ...”

“Think anybody heard the gunshots?” Tee asked.

“Naw, girl. This ain’t Brooklyn. Wasn’t nobody around for miles, and anyway, we in gun country.”

“What about those racist-lookin’ guys in the Jeep?” Tee said. A shudder ran through her every time she remembered the blood-soaked insignia.

“*That* was some shit we gonna have to look into,” Neville said. “Never seen their likes before.”

“You gonna have Rrrrebecca do it?” Izzy said with a sly smile.

Neville shook his head. “Did she look like a Rebecca to you?”

“Maybe! Okay, no, you right. Rrrrrrachel?”

“I mean, won’t those skinheads come looking for us?” Tee asked.

“How they gonna find us?” Neville said.

Izzy snapped her fingers. “The plates!”

“You think these are my real plates?” Neville guffawed. “That’s cute.”

“They saw our faces,” Tee said.

Neville chuckled again. “They gonna come to Bed-Stuy looking for an old black man and two black girls. I sincerely look forward to that. Those fellas didn’t look like they had much of an eye for detail, not when it comes to us anyway.”

“Damn,” Tee said. “You’re good.”

“Here’s the thing, though,” Neville said as the first cluster of suburbs and housing projects rose around them. “Y’all really can’t go talking ’bout this to no one. Not a soul. If Bennie ask, it’s none’a her business, unfortunately. It’s gotta stay between you two, me, Lani, and our friend Ms. R, and those lanky bald-headed motherless trashbags back there.” He lit a Conejo. “Clear?”

Tee and Izzy nodded.

The highways became bridges and then the suburbs became skyscrapers, and Tee looked down at Lani sleeping soundly beside her. Corinna Dutch had come home in a body bag. Neville must’ve torn the neighborhood apart searching for her killer, and all the while he’d been right there, praising the Lord in their midst. The world had forgotten Corinna. Even with the full force of Manny’s printing press and all her loved ones, the world had moved on; even before her body had been found, the world had moved on. Everyone was in too much of a hurry to bother lifting up a black girl’s name, to cherish her memory. Tee shook her head and watched the city rise and fall around them.

They would drop Lani off with her family. Amidst tears and late-night celebrations, Neville would let the family know to take her to the hospital and have her checked out. He’d tell them to keep a low profile — though it wasn’t like the cops were interested in the case anyway — and they would know that the one who’d taken their daughter was dealt with, and not to ask too many questions about how. Tee and Izzy would wait in the Caddy, staying as far away from the whole thing as possible, and then Neville would drive them to Izzy’s, where they could spend the night together without anyone barging in, and Tee could slip out in the morning undetected.

They'd crawl under the covers, their terrible secret like a candle between them; they would memorize each other's skin and the feel of flesh against flesh, their breath, all that they had lived and they would live still, and most of all the moment, this moment, because the city was impossibly huge, a forest, and *now she's nowhere* lurked around every corner; they would hold each other and remember and remember and remember.



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# SHADOWSHAPER

“Sierra? What are you staring at?”

“Nothing, Manny.”

Blatant lie. Sierra glanced down from the scaffolding to where Manny the Domino King stood with his arms crossed over his chest. “You sure?” he said.

“Yeah.” Sierra looked back at the mural. She hadn’t been making it up: a single tear glistened at the corner of Papa Acevedo’s painted eyes. The tear wasn’t moving — of course it wasn’t moving: It was paint! But still: It hadn’t been there yesterday or the day before.

And the portrait was fading; it seemed to disappear more and more every hour. This afternoon when she arrived at the Junklot to work on her own mural, it took Sierra a few seconds to find the old man’s face peering out from the brick. But fading murals and crying murals were totally different flavors of weird.

She turned back to her own painting, on a much newer concrete façade adjacent to the old brick building from which Papa Acevedo’s face stared out. “Hey, Manny,” Sierra said. “You sure the people who own this building won’t be mad about my mural?”

“We’re sure they *will* be,” Manny chuckled. “That’s why we asked you to do it. We hate the Tower. We spit on the Tower. Your paint is our nasty loogie, hocked upon the stupidity that is the Tower.” He grinned up at Sierra and then turned back to an old typewriter he’d been tinkering with.

“Great,” Sierra said. The Tower had shown up just over a year ago, totally unannounced: a five-story concrete monstrosity on a block otherwise full of brownstones. The developers built the outer structure quickly and then left it, abandoned and unfinished, its unpaned windows staring emptily out into the Brooklyn skies. The Tower’s northern wall sat right on the edge of the Junklot, where mountains of trashed cars waited like crumpled-up scraps of paper. Manny and the other old guys who played dominos in the lot had immediately declared war on it.

Sierra dabbed dark green paint along the neck of the dragon she was working on. It reared all the way up to the fifth floor of the Tower, and even though most of its body was just an outline, Sierra could tell it was gonna be fierce. She shaded rows of scales and spines, and smiled at how the creature seemed to come to life a fraction more with each new detail.

When Manny first asked her to paint something on the Tower, she’d refused. She’d never painted a mural before, just filled notebook after notebook with wild creatures and winged, battle-ready versions of her friends and neighbors. And a whole wall? If she messed up, all of Brooklyn would see it. But Manny was persistent, said she could paint anything she wanted, said he’d set up a scaffolding. He added that if her old Grandpa Lázaro was still talking in full sentences instead of laid up from that stroke he’d had, he would’ve wanted her to do it too.

That last one sealed it. Sierra couldn’t say no to even the idea of Grandpa Lázaro. And so here she was, on the second day of summer break, adding a few more scales along a pair of dragon wings and worrying about crying murals.

Her phone buzzed with a text from her best friend, Bennie:

*party at sully’s tonight. First of the summmmmmer!!!! Imma meet you at your house be ready in an hour.*

The first party of the summer was always amazing. Sierra smiled, pocketed her phone, and started packing up her supplies. It was nine p.m.

The dragon could wait.

She looked back at the mural of Papa Acevedo, barely visible now against the crumbling brick wall. It wasn't just that there was a new tear on his face; his whole expression had changed. The man — the painting, rather — looked downright afraid. Papa Acevedo had been one of Grandpa Lázaro and Manny's domino buddies. He'd always had a kind smile or a joke for Sierra, and whoever had painted his memorial portrait had captured that warmth perfectly. But now, his face seemed twisted with shock somehow, eyebrows raised, the edges of his mouth turned down beneath that unruly mustache.

The glistening painted tear trembled and slid out of the old man's eye and down his face.

Sierra gasped. "What the —!"

The scaffolding shivered. She looked down. Manny had one hand on a support beam, the other cupped around the phone earpiece he always had in. His head was bowed, shaking from side to side.

"When?" Manny said. "How long ago?"

Sierra looked one last time at Papa Acevedo and climbed down the scaffolding.

"You are sure?" Manny looked up at her and then back down. "You're sure it was him?"

"You okay?" Sierra whispered.

"I'll be right there. Ya. Ya vengo, ahora mismo. Dentro de . . . quince minutos. Okay." Manny poked the button on his earpiece and stared at the ground for a few seconds.

"What happened?" Sierra asked.

"Reporter stuff," Manny said. He closed his eyes. Besides being the self-appointed Domino King of Brooklyn, he published, wrote, and delivered the *Bed-Stuy Searchlight*, churning out the three pages of local gossip and event updates from a little basement printing press over on Ralph Avenue. The *Searchlight* had been coming every day for as long as Sierra could remember.

“Somebody you know?”

Manny nodded. “Knew. Ol’ Vernon, we called him. He’s gone.”

“Dead?”

He nodded, shook his head, nodded again.

“Manny? What does that mean?”

“I have to go, Sierra. You finish this painting, you hear me?”

“What? Tonight? Manny, I . . .”

“No! Ha.” He looked at her, finally smiled. “Of course not. Just, soon.”

“Okay, Manny.”

In a flurry of jangling keys and heavy breathing, Manny shut down the industrial lights and let them out of the iron fence around the Junklot.

“Have a good time tonight, Sierra. Don’t worry about me. But be careful!”

Sierra’s phone buzzed as she watched Manny rush off into the Brooklyn night. It was Bennie again.

*You comin right?*

Sierra texted a quick *yeh* and pocketed her phone. An early summer breeze wafted through her hair as she fast-walked past brownstones and corner stores, rounded the corner onto Lafayette, and headed home. She had to get ready for the party and check on Grandpa Lázaro, but all she could think about was Papa Acevedo’s teardrop.



The first book in the *New York Times* bestselling Shadowshaper series

# SHADOWHOUSE FALL

Sierra Santiago closed her eyes and the whole spinning world opened up around her. A brisk wind whispered songs of the coming winter as it shushed through browning leaves and then whisked along the moonlit field, throwing Sierra's mass of curls into disarray. Up above, the first round of overnight flights leaving JFK cut trails across the cloudless sky. Traffic whirled along just outside the park walls, and beyond that the shuttle train sighed and screeched to a halt; doors slid open; weary passengers collected their personal belongings as instructed, adjusted their earbuds, and headed off into the night.

But that was the simple stuff. Sierra had learned to expand her senses out farther than any normal person. It wasn't easy, but when she quieted her mind and the spirits were close, she could hear the city's clicks and groans halfway across Brooklyn. Tonight wasn't about meditation or the ongoing urban symphony, though. Where were her spirits?

As if in response, a vision sizzled into view in her mind's eye: there in the forest, not too far from her, a figure crouched. She could make out the silhouette leaning against a fallen tree, see the person's fast-beating heart telegraph frantic pulses out into the chilly night. The person scratched something onto the tree and looked around for nearby spirits.

*I see you*, Sierra thought, tensing her face into a smug smile. *Whoever you are. Now who else is out there?* She let the image go and immediately another appeared: the field she sat on the edge of; a figure lay facedown in the grass, breathing heavily. After a few seconds, the person hunched up on

their elbows and peered into the darkness. *Okay.* Sierra nodded. *Got it. What else?*

The next vision appeared so suddenly it almost knocked her over. Dark trees whipped past, and someone was panting. Running and panting. Sierra felt her own heart thunder in her ears. The other views she'd seen had been through spirit vision: a cadre of shadows she'd come to think of as her own Secret Service detail. But this was different—it was someone alive. Or *something* . . . Branches whisked out of its way as it bounded across the forest. *Which forest? Was it . . . was it close?* Sierra tried to scan for clues, but everything was moving too fast.

*Spirits,* Sierra beckoned. *Find this . . . thing.* She didn't remember having stood up, but she was on her feet. A wave of dizziness rushed over her as the half-dozen views of Prospect Park swimming through her mind veered suddenly skyward and then turned toward the shadowy fields and forests below.

All but one.

Whatever it was kept storming through the forest, panting, its whole body tensed with intent. It was . . . it was hunting. Sierra felt its hunger deep within herself; saliva flooded her own mouth. Flesh would be torn, a panicked heart would race and then falter and finally fail in this monster's jaws. The thing lunged, and Sierra's eyes popped open as a hand landed on her shoulder.

"Gotya!"

Sierra screamed and spun around, elbows first. She hit something soft and jumped back.

"Ow! What the hell, Sierra?" Big Jerome stood there rubbing his chest and pouting.

"I . . . Jerome . . ." Sierra scanned the field behind him, the forest beyond. Nothing. "I don't know . . . what happened."

"I do: You were so surprised I actually won a practice round you damn near cracked a rib."



“No . . .” Sierra rubbed her eyes. A branch snapped in the woods she had been facing. She spun around, probed the darkness for movement.

“Sierra?” Sierra’s mom, María Santiago, called. “¿Qué pasó, m’ija?” She walked up next to Jerome. “I was hiding and then I saw this guy barrel past and actually reach you and I knew something had to be going on.”

“Whoa,” Jerome said. “Mrs. Santiago with the snark. If you hadn’t tangled your chalk spirits with my twig monsters at the last training run, neither of us would need extra practice.”

“Mind your manners, jóven,” María snapped. “What’s a twig monster supposed to do anyway? Set itself on fire and dive-bomb the bad guys? Come on, man. Anyway, you didn’t ’shape anything this round to win, you just ran through the field like a lost moose! That doesn’t even—”

“Shh,” Sierra said, her eyes still on the forest.

María scowled. “Sierra, don’t you—”

“*Shh!*” Sierra hissed. “Something’s out there.”

If María asked a bunch of annoying parenty-type questions instead of being quiet, Sierra was going to scream. A year ago, that’s what her mom would’ve done, but since embracing the family legacy and becoming a shadowshaper four months back, María had let go of some of her extra-eyeroll-worthy mom habits. She sighed, probably scrunched up her face, but said no more.

Sierra exhaled. Squinted into the forest. If her kinda-sorta-maybe-sometimes boyfriend, Robbie, had shown up like he was supposed to, at least she’d have another skillful shadowshaper to face this down with. But of course, he was once again a no-show.

Her spirits had swooped back down into the park and were springing along through the underbrush. The charging, starving whatever-it-was was gone. At least, she couldn’t see through its eyes any more. Maybe it was right there at the edge of the darkness, watching her.

Sierra narrowed her eyes and steeled herself. She had done enough running away over the summer, when she first learned about the magical art of shadowshaping and her family’s legacy. It had only been a few months,

but she wasn't that scared little girl anymore. She wasn't even just a shadowshaper—her dead abuela had passed on the mantle and made Sierra into the next Lucera, the beating heart of the shadowshaping world. She was still figuring out what all her powers were, but one thing she had promised herself was that she wouldn't be that freaked-out, screaming girl in all the horror movies. No more running away. She took a step toward the dark forest.

“Uh, Sierra,” Jerome said. “What’re you doing?”

“There’s something in the trees.”

“I get that. Why are you going *toward* it?”

Shadows rose up around Sierra, tall, long-legged spirits that would leap into her drawings and lash out if needed. Their gentle hum rose in the night air, filled Sierra with that familiar mix of ferocity and calm, like a loving hurricane within. She pulled two pieces of chalk from her hoodie pocket and held one in each hand. “Stay where you are, J. I got this.”

“But—” Jerome started. María must have calmed him with a hand on the shoulder, or probably a gentle slap. She knew better than to try to stop her daughter in one of her gung ho moments.

Sierra reached her arms out to either side and strode into the shadows. She scraped the chalk along the trees around her as she walked, then tapped the marks once with her fingertips. The forest night closed in around her. Even with the spirits heightening her vision as they slid along in smooth, sparkling strides, it seemed like a blanket of darkness had been thrown over the whole world. She could run—she could always run—but she would never run; she had promised herself. She would find out what this was and fight it if she had to. The chalk scratches sped along the tree trunks, flashes of color, and then disappeared in the gloom up ahead. They weren't the best weapons to have—nowhere near as strong as a painted mural, for example—but they'd be able to keep an enemy busy till she could work out something better.

Hopefully.

And then, very suddenly, Sierra stopped. She wasn't alone. The certainty of someone else there, a presence, tickled along her shoulders and the back of her neck.

"Don't be afraid," a girl's voice said as Sierra spun around.

"Mina?"

Mina Satorius was a grade above Sierra at Octavia Butler High, but she looked fourteen. She had big eyes and her strawberry blond hair was ponytailed, with bangs at the front and a spindly curl framing her face on either side. She stood in the middle of a clearing, wearing a plaid shirt over a tank top and a sweater tied around her waist. Despite what she'd just said, Mina herself looked terrified—eyebrows creased with worry, bottom lip trembling slightly, arms wrapped around her slender frame.

"What are you doing out here?" Sierra asked. Her towering shadows emerged in a circle around Mina; their gentle glow pulsed in time with Sierra's own heartbeat. Shimmering chalk marks appeared on the trees, poised to flush forward and attack.

"I'm . . . I . . ." She looked like she might collapse into a puddle any second. Sierra resisted the urge to walk up and hug her. Something had been out here hunting, something ferocious. It was hard to imagine Mina could have anything to do with that panting monster whose eyes Sierra had seen through, but . . .

"Spit it out, Mina. We're not safe here."

"I know," Mina said. "That's what . . . that's what I'm here to say. A warning."

The shadows around Mina rustled, seemed to whisper to each other. Mina glanced up, her eyes widening even more. She had the spirit vision, Sierra realized, just not very advanced. At least, that's how she made it seem.

"You have a warning for me, so you hide out in the woods and wait for me to come to you? You couldn't send a text or something? This is creepy."

"No, I know, I . . . I was gonna come out and talk to you, but then I felt it nearby and . . ."

“Felt what, girl? Come on, now.”

“The . . .” She shook her head. “Here.” With a trembling hand, she held up what looked like an old playing card.

Sierra didn’t move. “What’s that?”

“It’s from the Deck of Worlds. Take it.”

Sierra shook her head. “My mama told me not to take freaky magic cards from strange white girls I meet in the woods.”

“Sierra, I’m . . . I’m not here to hurt you. I know you’ve had problems with the Sorrows before, but—”

“You’re with the Sorrows?” All the shadows tensed and took a step forward. Sierra clenched her fists. “Get out of here. Leave. Don’t talk to me in the hallway. Don’t talk to my friends. And definitely don’t let me catch you skulking around these woods while I’m working with my shadowshapers.”

“It’s not like that, Sierra, listen—”

“I listened. I heard what you said. Get out of my sight before I let these shadows loose on you.”

Mina shook her head, took a step backward. “You don’t understand,” she whispered, placing the card in the soft forest soil at her feet. “But when you do, come find me. I’m not . . . I’m not your enemy, Sierra. Take the card. *Don’t* leave it there. You need to . . . you need to take it.” She turned around and ran.

Sierra took a step toward the card.

“Sierra?” María called from behind her. “¿Estás bien, m’ija?”

“Sí, Mami,” Sierra said. “Ya voy.”

She crouched down to get a better look. An archaic, faded drawing was scrawled on the front of the card. It showed a white wolf with blue glowing eyes, its jaws open and lips pulled back into a snarl. Gleaming castle towers spiraled toward a stormy sky in the background. *El SABUESO de la LUZ* was scrawled across the top in elegant, medieval print. On the bottom it read, *The HOUND of LIGHT*.

Sierra stood up. The spirits flushed around her as she backed away from the card, then turned and walked quickly out of the woods.



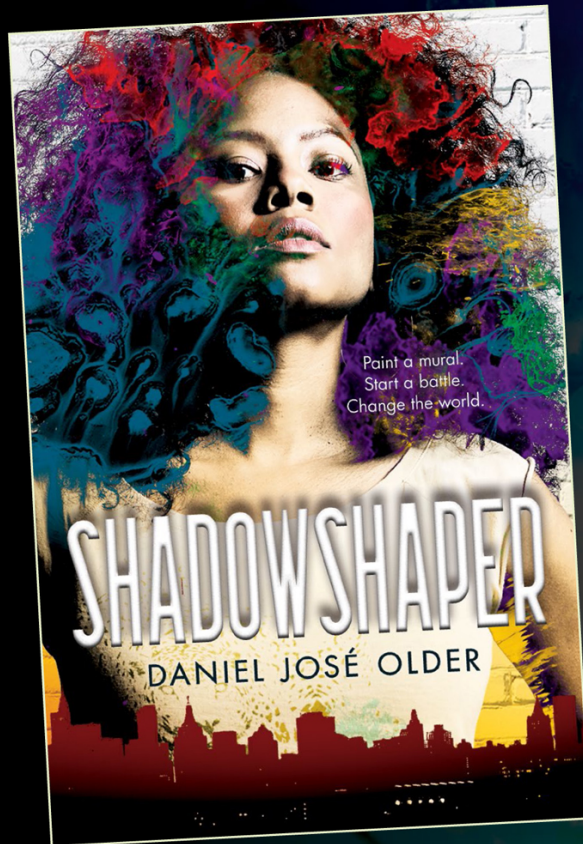
The thrilling sequel to the *New York Times* bestseller *Shadowshaper*,  
coming in Fall 2017

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Daniel José Older's first young adult novel, *Shadowshaper*, received four starred reviews, won the International Latino Book Award, was nominated for the Kirkus Prize and the Andre Norton Award for Young Adult Science Fiction and Fantasy, and was also recognized as a *New York Times* Notable Book and an NPR Best Book of the Year. It went on to become a *New York Times* bestseller. Daniel is also the author of the Bone Street Rumba adult urban fantasy series and the short-story collection *Salsa Nocturna*. His essays on race, power, and publishing have been published online and in the collections *The Fire This Time* and *Here We Are: Feminism for the Real World*, and his short stories have appeared in many science fiction and fantasy magazines and anthologies. He writes music and plays bass in the soul-jazz band Ghost Star.

Daniel lives in the Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood of Brooklyn, New York, where *Shadowshaper* and *Shadowhouse Fall* are set. You can find his thoughts on writing, read dispatches from his decade-long career as a New York City paramedic, and hear his music at his website, [danieljoseolder.net](http://danieljoseolder.net), and follow him on social media at @djolder.

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SHADOWSHAPERe



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